



THE UNITED KINGDOM'S BREXIT DECISION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 2000S ENLARGEMENTS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract. Brexit, or the voluntary withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from membership of the European Union (EU), is considered as one of the main events of the international arena in the twenty-first century. For the first time in its history, the EU faced the withdrawal of a member state, which stands out for a major political, economic and military role inside and outside Europe. Although as a process it has been finalized in 2021, the factors that had an impact on Brexit are still being discussed. One of the main factors that affected the British people's vote to withdraw their country from EU membership was immigration. As a result of the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, many people had the opportunity to come to Britain to work and live. The main purpose of this paper is to explain how the enlargements of the EU during the 2000s increased the number of Brexiteers in the UK. For the realization of the research, qualitative methods were used, based on the collection of primary and secondary data from the bibliography and credible internet sources related to the EU enlargement policies and Brexit. The research results have shown that the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 enabled hundreds of thousands of citizens from 12 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries to come to Britain for a better welfare system. This was considered by some Britons as an abuse of free movement and a very serious threat to their future, while Brexit was seen by them as the only salvation from this situation. The conclusions of the paper aim to increase the knowledge regarding the impact of the EU enlargement policies of the 2000s on very delicate processes, such as the decision of the UK to withdraw from the EU.

Key words: European Union, 2000s enlargements, impact, United Kingdom, Brexit.

Introduction

Ten countries in 2004 and two countries in 2007 joined the EU, thus doubling the number of its member states from 15 to 27. Meanwhile, the latest accession to the EU is Croatia in July 2013, which had brought the number of EU members to 28. The fifth and sixth phases of EU enlargement, otherwise known as its eastern enlargement, contributed to the growth of peace, stability and prosperity in the EU. However, this enlargement of the EU also had its challenges since the member states were in different political and economic situations. The citizens of these countries used the right of free movement and residence in other EU countries, especially in the UK. Their number increased continuously, so much so that the British people considered that this freedom of movement and residence was being abused (Rashica, 2024a, p. 192). Alongside the protection of national sovereignty and some EU policies, immigration had become

another serious concern for them. As a result, the UK's voluntary withdrawal from EU membership, otherwise known as Brexit, occurred.

The main purpose of this article is to explain the impact of the 2000s EU enlargements on the UK's decision for Brexit. The research question is: Why is immigration from the EU considered as one of the main factors that had an impact on the British people's decision for Brexit? While, the main hypothesis of the article states: An important issue that had a major impact on the British people's decision for Brexit was immigration from the EU. They considered that EU citizens from CEE were abusing with the freedom of movement within the EU, thus becoming a threat to their future in terms of employment, better living conditions, and security.

To answer the research question as accurately as possible, and to verify the raised hypothesis, the article in addition to the abstract, introduction, conclusion and references, also consists of three separate sections. The first section provides basic information about the 2000s enlargements of the EU. Within three subsections, it specifies the key points of the EU enlargement in 2004, then in 2007, as well as the advantages and challenges of these enlargements. The second section describes the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, which in the first subsection clarifies the right and conditions of withdrawal from EU membership and in the second subsection the activation of Article 50 by the UK. The third section is the most important section of the article as it presents an analysis of why immigration from the EU had a strong impact on the British people's decision for Brexit.

The article has a descriptive, explanatory, analytical and comparative nature. For its realization was used the qualitative methodological approach, based on the collection of primary and secondary data from the bibliography and credible internet sources related to EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, as well as the process and causes of Brexit.

The 2000s enlargements of the EU

The EU's 2004 enlargement

The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 can be considered the starting point of the dissolution of the entire communist bloc in the East. This event, together with political, economic, and social changes within Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Perestroika¹, and political changes in the countries of Central Europe (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania) led to the USSR's defeat in the Cold War and its collapse. So, we can say that all of these events together have contributed to the process of European reunification because Moscow's rule over Eastern European countries ended. From then on the EU and the candidate countries worked tirelessly together to prepare the enlargement within the framework of bilateral accession partnerships between the EU and each candidate country. From 1987 to 1996 thirteen countries submitted applications to join the EU: Cyprus; Estonia; Hungary; Poland; the Czech Republic; Slovenia; Bulgaria; Latvia; Lithuania; Malta; Romania; Slovakia; and Turkey. The Luxembourg European Council (EC) of 12 and 13 December, 1997 launched the EU enlargement process, in which 'each of the applicant states would proceed at its own rate, depending on its degree of preparedness'. To prepare

¹ Perestroika refers to a series of political and economic reforms meant to kick-start the stagnant 1980s economy of the Soviet Union. Its architect, President Mikhail Gorbachev, oversaw the most fundamental changes to his nation's economic engine and political structure since the Russian Revolution of 1917. But these reforms contributed to the collapse of the USSR in 1991, from which 15 independent states were created: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Belarus and the Russian Federation.

for EU membership, the candidate countries first signed Europe Agreements in the case of CEE countries or Association Agreements with Turkey, Cyprus and Malta (European Union Law, 2007), as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Preparations for the fifth EU enlargement

Country	Signing of Europe Agreement or Association Agreement	Date of application for accession
Bulgaria	01.03.1993	14.12.1995
Cyprus	19.12.1972	03.07.1990
Estonia	12.06.1995	24.11.1995
Hungary	16.12.1991	31.03.1994
Latvia	12.06.1995	13.10.1995
Lithuania	12.06.1995	08.12.1995
Malta	05.12.1970	03.07.1990
Poland	16.12.1991	05.04.1994
Czech Republic	06.10.1993	17.01.1996
Romania	08.02.1993	22.06.1995
Slovakia	06.10.1993	27.06.1995
Slovenia	10.06.1996	10.06.1996
Turkey	12.09.1963	14.04.1987

Source: EU (2007, January 23).

Accession negotiations began on March 31, 1998 with the six best-prepared countries like Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Czechia and Slovenia, and on February 15, 2000 with all the other candidate countries like Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovakia, except Turkey. They were based on the principle of 'differentiation', i.e. each country's progresses at its own pace according to its level of preparation for accession. The length of the negotiations therefore varied according to each country's progress. The Copenhagen EC of December 2002 found that 10 of the 13 candidate countries fulfilled the conditions necessary for joining the EU. They therefore signed their Accession Treaty on 16 April 2003 in Athens (EU, 2007, January 23).

The fifth phase of the enlargement of the EU took place on May 1, 2004, when ten countries joined it: Cyprus; Estonia; Hungary; Poland; Czechia; Slovenia; Latvia; Lithuania; Malta; and Slovakia. The 2004 enlargement was not only unprecedented in scale and scope but also represented the EU's initial response to the high number of requests for membership from the former communist states (Gateva, 2015, p. 38). The Eastern enlargement of the EU was in many regards a historical caesura. It overcame the previous division of the Europe since the new frontier now ran along the River Bug² and through the former USSR, which at any rate was much more permeable than during the Cold War. It dwarfed any prior EU expansions by almost doubling the number of member states, increasing its total population to almost half a billion people and spreading its territory by over a million square kilometers closing in on its pan-European vision. Hence, Eastern enlargement is the most crucial case among EU enlargements (Mehlhausen, 2016, p. 58).

The applicant states differed in some relevant aspects, splitting them analytically into three groups. The most developed group of states were the Visegrád states like Poland, Hungary, Czechia

² The Bug or Western Bug is a major river in Eastern Europe that flows through Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine, with a total length of 774 kilometres and for a long section it marks the border between Poland and its eastern neighbors, Belarus and Ukraine.

and Slovakia, which were at the outset the most promising candidates. The Mediterranean island states of Cyprus and Malta were similar in geographic location and size, though Cyprus was a much more delicate candidate than Malta given the dispute with Northern Cyprus and Turkey³. They were the only states without a socialist past and given their minor size were easy bits to swallow. The three Baltic states like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, shared general characteristics of being located in the Eastern periphery and their small size of population and economy. The most striking feature, however, seems to be the external and internal instability resulting from their strained relations with Russia due to their past as Soviet republics in the USSR and the tensions with the local Russian minorities, particularly in Estonia and Latvia. Nonetheless, there are compelling reasons not to analyze them separately in these groups. First of all, they were all significantly below the average GDP within the EU. None of the applicants except for Cyprus reached the GDP per capita of the poorest among existing EU member states until 1999. Second, they had in common a rather unstable political system, with the exception of Malta. Third, the unfolding of enlargement was largely synchronic (Mehlhausen, 2016, pp. 58–59).

The EU's 2007 enlargement

The second phase of the fifth enlargement was completed with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania on January 1, 2007. Although both countries were 'part of the same inclusive and irreversible enlargement process', they did not accede to the EU in May 2004 (Gateva, 2015, p. 80). Bulgaria and Romania have often been described as the 'laggards' of the EU's Eastern enlargement. From their applications for EU membership in 1995 to their eventual accession in 2007, the two countries were consistently trailing their CEE counterparts in the enlargement 'regatta' launched by the Luxembourg European Council in 1997. While the EU's decision to open accession negotiations with all remaining CEE countries two years later enabled, at least in principle, each country to accede if and when it was ready for membership, neither Bulgaria nor Romania were successful in either keeping up with Lithuania, Slovakia or Latvia which began negotiations at the same time or catching up with the 'ins' of Estonia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia whose negotiations were already underway. The difficulties inherent in overcoming the immense political, economic and administrative challenges involved in meeting the Copenhagen criteria⁴ were reflected in virtually every European Commission report between 1998 and 2006. Indeed, the Commission's recommendation as to the actual date of accession to the Union was only made in September 2006, just a few months before the two countries joined, demonstrating the reluctance with which the EU and the member states tidied up the eastern enlargement (Chiva & Phinnemore, 2012, p. 5).

³ The Cyprus dispute is an ongoing dispute between the Greek Cypriot community which runs the Republic of Cyprus (de facto only comprising the south of the island since the events of 1974) and the Turkish Cypriot community in the north of the island, where troops of the Republic of Turkey are deployed. This dispute is an example of a protracted social conflict.

⁴ The Treaty on European Union sets out the conditions and principles to which any country wishing to become a member of the EU must conform. Certain criteria must be met for accession. These criteria, known as the Copenhagen criteria, were established by the Copenhagen EC in 1993 and strengthened by the Madrid European Council in 1995. They are: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU; the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law, and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

The advantages and challenges

The enlargement of the EU has contributed significantly to the spread of stability, peace and prosperity across the continent. Enlargement brings many benefits for new member states, including political stability, freedom for citizens to live, study or work anywhere in the EU, increased trade via access to the single market, increased funding and investment, and higher social, environmental, and consumer standards. Enlargement also benefits the EU, as it means increased prosperity and opportunities for European citizens and businesses, a stronger voice on the world stage, more cultural diversity, the promotion of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, an investment in peace and security in Europe. Countries wishing to join must have stable institutions that can guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities, a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with the competitive pressure of the EU market, the ability to take on the obligations of EU membership, including the capacity to implement all EU law and adhere to the aims of the Union (European Union, 2024a). The EU's motivations for eastern enlargement center on the protection and enhancement of the Union's position in the world market and augmenting and enhancing its economic power relative to peer competitors. Extending the economic community eastward would, first, guard against cheap competition from CEE, in what are perceived to be vital economic sectors in the EU. In addition, enlargement boosts the EU's negotiating muscle within institutions of international trade such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). Eastern enlargement also offered the possibility to revisit (and reform) existing EU policies (O'Brennan, 2006, p. 134).

The enlargement from 15 to 25 countries has made it possible to extend the area of stability and peace to the whole European continent, and so avoid the recurrence of conflicts such as that in the former Yugoslavia, to stimulate economic growth and trade by expanding the single market from 378 million to 453 million consumers in 2004, with a prospect of more than 480 million by 2007, and to acquire a greater role for Europe on the international stage, particularly in trade negotiations (EU, 2007, January 23). The increase in the number of member states with differing economic situations, the size of the EU's population and the number of languages spoken calls for some effort to be made by member states, particularly in financial terms. From 2000 to 2003 the European Commission devoted 13.2 billion euros to pre-accession expenditure. More than 41 billion euros were released for the period 2004-2006 (EU, 2007, January 23). While the anticipated surge in trade certainly took place (even in advance of 2004) the potential budgetary cost of eastern enlargement may be difficult to contain, for all the determination displayed by the net contributors to limit EU spending. If eastern enlargement constitutes but a first step, with further enlargement to the Balkans, and, as importantly, Turkey, to follow, the process will eventually entirely reshape the territorial, political, institutional, economic, and perhaps even, cultural contours of the European and Eurasian landmass. EU borders might potentially reach Iran, Iraq, Syria, large swathes of Russia and the Caucasus. Notwithstanding the functional and technocratic basis of the European integration process, and the fact that the accession criteria hardly mention security issues, eastern enlargement brought to the forefront of EU politics important geopolitical and security issues at every stage (O'Brennan, 2006, p. 115).

Another important focus of attention for eastern enlargement was the distinct geopolitical dimension to the decisions on which countries were to be favored with candidate status and the timeframe in which they could expect to successfully conclude negotiations. Although the Commission and Council for long adhered to a policy of differentiation on the grounds of merit

and progress in transposition of the *acquis communautaire*⁵, it is clear that at least some of the candidate states were included for purely geopolitical reasons. Some decisions proved contentious within the internal EU deliberations. Others caused tension in the negotiations with the candidate states and with important regional powers such as Russia. Across every dimension of the process of selecting candidates geopolitics mattered (O'Brennan, 2006, p. 123). The eastern enlargement process represented, if not the best or indeed the only mechanism in fighting existential threats or security externalities, at least an important component of EU policy.

The withdrawal of the UK from EU membership

The right and conditions of withdrawal from EU membership

Termination of a state's membership in an international organization can occur when an organization dissolves. But, while the organization continues to exist, membership may be terminated by withdrawal (a voluntary act of the member state), by expulsion (a measure taken by the organization against the member state) and by the loss of membership upon failure to accept an amendment of the constitution of the organization. Another reason for termination not often mentioned is the disappearance of the member state or loss of its essential characteristics as a state (Rashica, 2019, p. 66). While it has always been generally assumed that the EU could be dissolved and individual withdrawals permitted by an agreement of all the member states, most publicists believed before the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 that the European treaties in their Nice version did not permit unilateral withdrawals, in view of express provisions stating that these treaties were concluded for unlimited periods (Dörr & Schmalenbach, 2018, p. 1057). The Lisbon Treaty for the first time defined the possibility of voluntary withdrawal of a member state from the EU according to the Article 50, which states:

- *Any member state may decide to withdraw from the EU in accordance with its own constitutional requirements;*
- *A member state which decides to withdraw shall notify the European Council of its intention. In the light of the guidelines provided by the 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 EU. That agreement shall be negotiated in accordance with Article 218(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. 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 (EP);*
- *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 Council, in agreement with the member state concerned, unanimously decides to extend this period;*
- *For the purposes of paragraphs 2 and 3, the member of the Council representing the withdrawing member state shall not participate in the discussions of the EC or in decisions concern-*

⁵ *Acquis communautaire* is a French term referring to the cumulative body of European Community laws, comprising the EC's objectives, substantive rules, policies and, in particular, the primary and secondary legislation and case law, all of which form part of the legal order of the EU. This includes all the treaties, regulations and directives passed by the European institutions, as well as judgements laid down by the European Court of Justice. The *acquis* is dynamic, constantly developing as the Community evolves, and fundamental. All member states are bound to comply with the *acquis communautaire*.

ing it. A qualified majority shall be defined in accordance with Article 238(3)(b)⁶ of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU;

- If a State which has withdrawn from the Union asks to rejoin, its request shall be subject to the procedure referred to in Article 49⁷ (EU, 2012, October 26).

Activation of Article 50 by the UK

A portmanteau of the words Britain and exit, Brexit caught on as shorthand for the proposal that Britain split from the EU and change its relationship to the bloc on trade, security and migration (Mueller, 2020). On June 23, 2016, the UK held a referendum regarding its membership in the EU. The results were in favor of withdrawing the UK from the EU because 51.9% of Britons voted to leave the EU, while 48.1% voted to remain in the EU (EC UK, 2019, July 31). But, although the general results of this referendum were in favor of Brexit, not all British countries voted for it, as the following table demonstrates:

Table 2. Share of votes in the Brexit referendum of 2016 in the UK, by nation

Countries	Remain	Leave
England	46.6%	53.4%
Wales	47.5%	52.5%
North Ireland	55.7%	44.2%
Scotland	62%	38%

Source: EC UK (2019, September 25).

An important piece of information regarding Table 2 is the fact that immigrants from the EU to the UK were mostly concentrated in England, specifically in London. 1,018,000 EU nationals lived in London representing 11.8% of London's population. In contrast, only 41,000 EU nationals lived in the North East representing only 1.6% of the North-East's population (UK Parliament, 2025).

Table 3. Brexit referendum vote by age group

Age	Leave the EU	Remain in the UE
18-24	27%	73%
25-34	38%	62%
35-44	48%	52%
45-54	56%	44%
55-64	57%	43%
65+	60%	40%

Source: BBC News (2016, June 14).

⁶ Article 238 (3) (b) of the Lisbon Treaty states: Where the Council does not act on a proposal from the Commission or from the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the qualified majority shall be defined as at least 72% of the members of the Council representing the participating member states, comprising at least 65% of the population of these states.

⁷ Article 49 of the Lisbon Treaty states: Any European state which respects the values and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union. The European Parliament and national Parliaments shall be notified of this application. The applicant state shall address its application to the Council, which shall act unanimously after consulting the Commission and after receiving the consent of the EP, which shall act by a majority of its component members. The conditions of eligibility agreed upon by the Council shall be taken into account. The conditions of admission and the adjustments to the Treaties on which the Union is founded, which such admission entails, shall be the subject of an agreement between the member states and the applicant state. This agreement shall be submitted for ratification by all the contracting states in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements.

Based on data from the Office for National Statistics in the UK, the median age in Britain for 2016 was 40 years old (ON UK, 2016, February 26). Table 3 shows that Britain's withdrawal from EU membership was opposed by people aged 18 to 44, who tend to be more informed about the functioning of EU institutions and who prioritize the benefits the UK received from the EU over the option of leaving. However, Britons aged 45 and over, including the unemployed or retired, had deep dissatisfaction and opposition to many EU policies since the beginning of Britain's membership in the European Economic Community (EEC), and considered immigration to be very dangerous for the country's security, and especially for the well-being and future of their descendants.

The British government's request for the activation of Article 50 was submitted to the EU on March 29, 2017 (UK Government, 2017, March 29). On May 22, 2017 during an EC meeting, the 27 EU member states approved the decision for authorization the start of EU negotiations with Britain, as well as the negotiating commission and directives that would define the EU's position in their first phase (EC, 2017, May 20). Officially, the Brexit negotiations opened on June 19, 2017 and their first phase was realized in the period June-December 2017, through six rounds. The three primary issues of the talks at this phase were: the rights of British and EU citizens; financial arrangements, including the obligations of the UK as long as it was an EU member state (Carrapico et al., 2019, pp. 19–20); the dilemma caused by the Irish Border⁸ (Lang & Miller, 2017, p. 12). When in December 2017 'sufficient progress' was reassessed and confirmed in the main issues of this phase, the guidelines for the opening of the second phase of negotiations were approved (Curtis et al., 2017, p. 5).

The second phase of Brexit negotiations opened on February 6, 2018. In addition to the transition period and the withdrawal agreement, part of the negotiations of this phase was also the issue of the Irish border (Miller, 2018, p. 5). However, within the UK there were many disagreements regarding the Brexit process, in which case the period defined in Article 50 was requested to be postponed three times by the British government, on March 20, 2019, on April 5, 2019 and on October 19, 2019 (EC, 2019, October 21). The last postponement was requested until January 31, 2020, which is also officially the date when the Withdrawal Agreement entered into force and the UK left the EU (EC, 2020, December 30). During the Brexit negotiations, there were disagreements between the parties, but they increased in the third phase of talks on the future partnership of the UK and the EU. Then, the complications of these talks were also affected by the coronavirus pandemic. But, despite the very complicated circumstances, the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement was reached on December 24, 2020. This agreement was approved by the EC on December 29, 2020 and from January 1, 2021 it was temporarily implemented (EC, 2020, January 30), until the EP's consent was received on April 27, 2021 for full implementation. The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement entered into force on May 1, 2021 (EP, 2021, April 28).

How did immigration from the EU impact the British people's vote for Brexit?

As it is known, voluntary factors of migration can be divided in social and economic ones. Some examples of social factors are better living conditions, as well as access to health care and good education, while economic factors include better employment prospects and higher wages. While

⁸ The Irish Border or the border of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland 500 km, was one of the most complicated issues of the Brexit negotiations because with the withdrawal of the UK from the EU it had to be decided to which the border would belong, the UK outside the EU or the Republic of Ireland inside the EU.

migration can benefit countries, by providing new trades, skills and a cheaper workforce, there are potential drawbacks to large scale migration. Healthcare and education services can become strained, a large influx of migrants can lead to housing shortages, cultural differences can lead to racial tensions and the welfare system can become strained if migrants claim benefits (Rashica, 2020, pp. 80–81). There are two factors that make the lives of irregular migrants, those without proper immigration status, either to reside or work more difficult than those of citizens or legal entrants, which are:

1. They have to remain invisible to the immigration authorities and to other officials concerned with law enforcement, and to citizens and legal residents who might perceive them as harmful in some way to their interests;
2. They have to survive without the support of those institutions designed to sustain the lives of lawful members of that society, including welfare systems, regulatory bodies and agencies for the protection of persons and property (Düvell, 2006, p. 52).

In the contemporary era, international migration has become one of the most contested and controversial social and political issues across Europe. However, responses to the presence of immigrants in political debate have varied from one country to another. Immigration involves the arrival of culturally diverse social groups and results in the emphasis of xenophobic sentiments (McMahon, 2015, p. 185).

A first glance at actors in EU immigration politics shows that three distinct groups are relevant: EU institutions such as the EC, the European Court of Justice (ECJ), and the EP; member states; and collective actors such as political parties and interest groups (Carrera, 2009, p. 21). From the perspective of member states, immigration policies are not primarily market-making and equal rights policies. For them, immigration entails costs and benefits that are perceived differently according to the respective immigrant categories seeking entry into member states. Member states' autonomy on immigration policies can be challenged by actual spill-over from the single market, anticipated spill-over stressed by EU institutions, and European conventions calling for compliance (Carrera, 2009, p. 29). Irregular migration, trafficking and smuggling in human beings represent major challenges for policy makers at national, the EU and international levels. However, these phenomena are often viewed as external and objective challenges facing states. In order to become a full-fledged citizen via naturalization, immigrants are usually required to be sufficiently integrated. Whether this is the case can be assessed using various criteria. For example in order to prove that s/he is sufficiently integrated to become a full member of society, applicants for naturalization in the UK have to show they have sufficient language skills and knowledge of society. People that did not fulfil the requirements for 'qualified persons' status, they had no right to reside, and subsequently no right to the benefits sought (Guild et al., 2009, p. 113). In the UK exists a special categorization of EU migrants, divided into two groups:

1. The best, which includes very specific categories such as EU students, researchers, National Health Service (NHS) workers are depicted within an economic prosperity frame, underlining the contributions those groups make to the UK economy;
2. The rest, which includes migrants that are mentioned within arguments of labour and social security, for instance referring to pressures migrants have on native wages, and on public services such as the NHS, schools, and housing (Fleming, 2018, p. 40).

It is almost impossible not to have noticed the profound impact that the 2004 enlargement of the EU, with the ensuing movements of migrants, has had on migration patterns within Europe, and to the UK in particular. From the perspective of Britain, not only have the demographic and geographic characteristics of new incoming migration shifted considerably, but public discourses of migration have similarly altered, leaving behind some of the intensity of hostility directed at 'asylum

seekers', to rest instead on discussions of the new East European migrants, how long they will stay, and what impact they have had on economic growth and public services across the country (Burrell, 2009, p. 1). The fear of further immigration from EU countries certainly played a role in Brexit, where high immigration may exert downward pressure on wages for low-skilled workers (Welfens, 2017, p. 271). Although EU migration was a relevant, and some would say, central issue in the campaign, a positive case for EU migrants living in the UK was absent (Fleming, 2018, p. 36). Overall, British migrants in other EU states are described using much more positive categorizations. British people in the EU are holidaymakers, retired, students, workers or young people, whereas the picture is more complex for EU migrants in the UK. There are some binary categories created for EU migrants, most notably Eastern (as opposed to Western) European migration and high (as opposed to low) skilled migration. Unlike the British, EU migrants are also mentioned in the context of negative categories such as criminals and 'low skilled East Europeans' (Fleming, 2018, p. 40).

In 2004 the UK used the accession of the ten new member states to restrict substantially the access to social benefits for all EU migrants (Guild et al., 2009, p. 235). When countries such as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined the EU, their citizens gained the right to move to the UK to live and work. This resulted in large numbers of immigrants coming to the UK in search of work as the UK economy was booming. Between 2004 and 2006 the UK became the host country for 600,000 Eastern European migrants. Many found jobs, particularly in the construction and retailing trades, earning up to five times as much as they did in their home countries (BBC News, 2016, June 24). The question arises, how is freedom of movement and residence regulated within the EU? All EU citizens and their family members have the right to move and reside freely within the EU and this is established by Article 21 of the Lisbon Treaty:

- *Every citizen of the Union shall have the right to move and reside freely within the territory of the member states, subject to the limitations and conditions laid down in the Treaties and by the measures adopted to give them effect;*
- *If action by the Union should prove necessary to attain this objective and the Treaties have not provided the necessary powers, the EP and the Council, acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure, may adopt provisions with a view to facilitating the exercise of the rights referred to in paragraph 1;*
- *For the same purposes as those referred to in paragraph 1 and if the Treaties have not provided the necessary powers, the Council, acting in accordance with a special legislative procedure, may adopt measures concerning social security or social protection. The Council shall act unanimously after consulting the EP (European Union Law, 2024b).*

There are two major peaks of immigration from the EU to the UK before Brexit. The first occurred shortly after the 2004 enlargement of the EU and ended following the financial crisis in 2008⁹. The second came in 2013-2015, mostly driven by an increase in immigration from Romania and Bulgaria after restrictions on their right to work in Britain were lifted. In 2015, EU net immigration to the UK was 172,000, while by March 2016, EU net migration peaked at over 280,000, with more than 500,000 EU nationals moving to the UK. The share of EU nationals grew from 1.5% to 5.3% of the total population and from 1.8% to 6.3% of the working age population (adults aged 16–64). Then, EU immigrants were more educated, younger, more likely to be in work and less

⁹ The 2008 financial crisis began with cheap credit and lax lending standards that fueled a housing bubble. When the bubble burst, the banks were left holding trillions of dollars of worthless investments in subprime mortgages. The Great Recession that followed cost many their jobs, their savings, and their homes. The seeds of the financial crisis were planted during years of rock-bottom interest rates and loose lending standards that fueled a housing price bubble in the U.S. and elsewhere. The downturn in economic activity was felt across the world, with many countries, including all G7 economies, falling into recession during 2008. The UK was in recession longer than the other G7 economies and was the last to exit, thus suffering total contractions in GDP of 6.4%.

likely to claim benefits than the UK-born. About 44% have some form of higher education compared with only 23% of the UK-born. About a third of EU immigrants lived in London, compared with only 11% of the UK-born. Many people were concerned that immigration reduces the pay and job chances of the UK-born due to more competition for jobs (Wadsworth et al., 2024). Manufacturing, accommodation and food services, as well as administrative and support services were the sectors most frequented by EU immigrants in the UK. As for the British countries where EU immigrants were most concentrated, England ranked first, especially London. After England, they were concentrated in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (UK Parliament, 2025). During the year 2025, 29% of EU nationals in the UK were Polish, as the following figure demonstrates (Fig. 1).

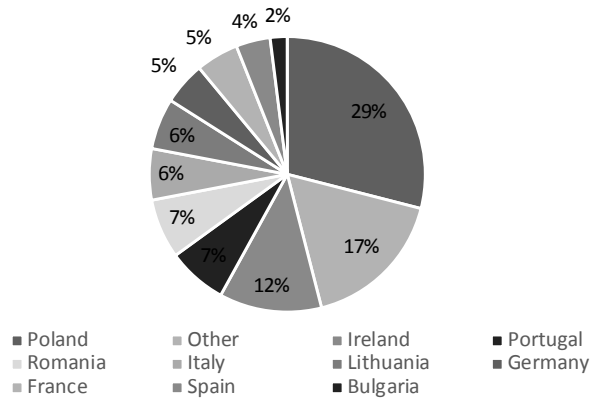


Figure 1. EU immigrants by nationality in the UK during 2015
Source: Wadsworth et al. (2024).

Members of post-communist societies want to create a new reality, completely different from the system they overthrew and the social relations it produced. It has been argued, on the one hand, that too many young people from Poland were leaving the country, with some commentators bemoaning the problems of 'brain drain' and a diminishing skilled workforce, as well as the potential financial difficulties this migration will create in the future. The West, especially the UK, was mythologized as a symbol of prosperity, wealth and a comfortable lifestyle by Poles (Burrell, 2009, p. 91). But, demonizing and illegitimizing 'economic migrants' represents a new challenge for contemporary European societies and democracies. This category potentially encompasses a high number of people forced to leave their country caused by socio-economic conditions and the threat of poverty (Vollmer, 2021, p. 73). The difficulties of preventing irregular migration in such circumstances are not only practical but also deeply political. In 2016, the number of Polish nationals resident in the UK reached 1 million. To be clearer, Poland born residents accounted for 10% of the total non-UK born residents in the UK, while resident Polish nationals accounted for 17% of the total non-British nationals resident in the UK. In 2016, the number of Polish born residents in the UK was nine times higher than in 2004 (94,000), whereas Polish nationals resident in the UK was more than 14 times higher than in 2004 (69,000). After Poland, attention in this regard is also paid to Romanians, which in 2016 accounted for 310,000 residents of the UK (ONS UK, 2017, August 24).

Immigration was one of the main concerns for the UK, which was also mentioned by former British Prime Minister David Cameron, when he started to lead the ‘reform and renegotiation’ process for the UK’s EU membership in 2015. One of the four areas where Britain needed substantial change was free movement and immigration. The UK needed to tackle abuses of the right to free movement and deliver changes that ensure British welfare system is not an artificial draw for people to come to its territory (UK Government, 2017, March 29). So, the British wanted to reduce the high level of migration from the EU by preventing the abuse of free movement and preventing British welfare system acting as a magnet for people to come to their country. The UK wanted to agree with the EU for longer re-entry bans for fraudsters and people who collude in sham marriages and for an end to the situation where EU nationals can avoid British immigration rules when bringing their families from outside the EU. Then the British people wanted to ensure that EU migrants cannot claim the new unemployment benefit, Universal Credit¹⁰, while looking for work and those coming from the EU who haven’t found work within 6 months could be required to leave (UK Government, 2017, March 29).

During the Brexit referendum campaign, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which is one of the most powerful Eurosceptic voices in Britain, considered that massive and uncontrolled immigration had greatly damaged the UK, including migration from EU countries. While the official figures of the British population in 1997 were 58 million inhabitants, in 2016 they reached 66 million. According to this party, the population growth of 6.6 million between 2000 and 2016 was 80%, mainly due to migrants and their births. As a result, UKIP urgently requested the imposition of restrictive measures against migrants in the UK, including here workers with work permits and students. Also, UKIP requested the annulment of the UK’s consent to the 1995 Barcelona Declaration¹¹ (UKIP, 2024). In addition to British Eurosceptics, UKIP also found support among retired and unemployed Britons, who considered EU immigrants a very serious threat to the future of the British people. Anti-EU viewpoints in Britain had also increased as a result of articles in some Eurosceptic British newspapers, such as: ‘The Sun’; ‘The Sunday Times’; ‘The Sunday Telegraph’; ‘The Daily Telegraph’; ‘Daily Mail’; ‘Daily Express’; and ‘The Daily Star’. A part of the British people were not well informed about the functioning and institutions of the EU and this created favorable spaces for increasing the influence of hostile news against the EU (Levy et al., 2016, p. 11). Arguments on immigration were among the most cited in the articles of these newspapers, alongside economic issues and national sovereignty (Rashica, 2024b, p. 97).

‘Vote Leave, take control’ campaign was one of the main campaigns for the 2016 British referendum, dedicated only to Brexit. According to this campaign, two main reasons why the UK should withdraw from the EU were:

- *After leaving the EU, the UK would have full control over its borders, deciding for itself who can visit its territory or not. A quarter of a million migrants came to the UK from other EU member states, putting a strain public services such as the NHS and schools. The Court of Justice of the EU was not stopping the arrival of violent criminals in Europe, and prevented Britain from detaining people suspected of being dangerous for terrorism;*

¹⁰ Universal Credit is a UK social security payment. It is means-tested and is replacing and combining six benefits, for working-age households with a low income: income-related Employment and Support Allowance; income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance, and Income Support; Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit; and Housing Benefit. An award of UC is made up of different elements, which become payable to the claimant if relevant criteria apply: a standard allowance for singles or couples, child elements and disabled child elements for children in the household, housing cost element, childcare costs element, as well as elements for being a carer or having an illness or disability and therefore having limited capability to work.

¹¹ On November 28, 1995, in Barcelona, the EU and 12 Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Palestinian Authorities, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey), put their signatures to a declaration concerning the new Euro Mediterranean Partnership which creates a framework for political, economic, cultural and social ties between the partners.

- *By leaving the EU, Britain would have full control over immigration, thus welcoming people based on the skills they have, not on the passports they hold. The former secretary-general of the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), Ronald K. Noble, said that Europe's open borders agreement would serve as an international passport-free zone for terrorists and that it was like "placing a sign welcoming terrorists to Europe" (Vote Leave, take control, 2022).*

Leave campaigners also portray British people abroad in a positive light, but mainly through an economic prosperity lens, underlining the contribution UK migrants bring to other EU economies, as opposed to EU migrants coming to the UK who are believed not to make a similar economic contribution (Fleming, 2018, p. 40).

Conclusion

In 2024, the EU marked the 20th anniversary of one of the largest enlargements in its history. On the other hand, countries such as Czechia, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia celebrated the 20th anniversary of their membership in the EU, which is also the realization of one of the key priorities of their foreign policy. After two years, this important anniversary will also be celebrated by states such as Bulgaria and Romania. However, even though there has been one EU membership after the 2000s, namely Croatia in 2013, the number of EU member states in 2025 is the same as in 2007. This is because the UK left in 2020 and if Croatia had not joined the EU, the number of EU members would have been one less than in 2007. The UK's withdrawal from EU membership, otherwise known as Brexit, marked the first time a member state has withdrawn from the EU. Although with a very close result, 51.9 to 48.1, the British people in the referendum of June 23, 2016 voted for the activation of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, which regulates voluntary withdrawal from EU membership. The three phases of Brexit negotiations within the period 2017-2020 were quite difficult, accompanied by complications and disagreements until the Withdrawal Agreement was reached on January 31, 2020 and until the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement entered into force on May 1, 2021. A number of factors contributed to Brexit, such as the protection of national security and British identity, dissents with EU policies, but immigration was also a factor with a major impact. Although it brings many benefits, immigration also has costs that depend on the respective categories of immigrants. The right of free movement within the EU was maximally used by the citizens of the 12 countries that joined the EU in the 2000s. One of their targets was the UK due to economic development and better living conditions. In the UK there is a special categorization of EU immigrants: the best, which includes EU students, researchers and NHS workers; and the rest, characterized by the low skilled East Europeans and negative categories such as criminals. In 2015, EU net immigration to the UK was 172,000, while non-EU immigration was 191,000. By March 2016, net EU migration was over 280,000, with more than 500,000 EU nationals moving to the UK. The most frequented place by them was England, especially London, while of all nationalities, Poles and Romanians dominated. EU immigration despite the economic benefits it brought to the UK, by some Britons it began to be seen as a threat to their future, which was thought to be endangering their well-being, jobs and security of livelihood. This was particularly characteristic of Britons aged 45 and over, the unemployed and the retired. The UKIP, the 'Vote Leave, take control' campaign, and a significant number of British newspapers also contributed to these viewpoints, thus deepening anti-EU immigration sentiments. As the only salvation from this situation was seen the Brexit option, which is rightly considered one of the EU's major crises.

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