

BILATERAL RELATIONS AFTER BREXIT: THE CASE OF UK'S TIES WITH CZECHIA AND THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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The UK's decision to leave the EU was a shock to the European regional order, which is underpinned by an array of multilateral economic and security institutions. The new UK-EU trade deal has now reset the economic relationship, but just as interesting is the way the preceding Brexit negotiations offer clues about the evolving power dynamics between the UK and its bilateral partners in Europe. Now is the right moment to question, therefore, how far bilateralism can recreate – or substitute for – the so-called “multiplier effect” of EU membership and help maintain UK aspirations for a prominent global role. After all, following the 2016 Brexit referendum the UK pledged to pursue a “Global Britain“ agenda that would promote a rules based international order.

An illustration of the challenges facing the UK's ability to leverage its bilateral ties in Europe can be seen from an analysis of two of the UK's bilateral relationships that were traditionally defined by acute power asymmetry: Czechia and the Slovak Republic. In our research on this topic, we draw on an extensive set of interviews conducted with ministry officials in both countries as well as embassy staff in London, thereby providing a substantial evidence base to analyse UK overtures to both countries. After the Brexit vote, the UK tried to turn on the charm with this pair, as part of a strategy to win allies for its negotiating objectives. The failure to get much in return reveals the manner in which power relations between the UK and remaining EU countries have been recalibrated, which in turn suggests providing leadership for multilateral endeavours post-Brexit will be a tall order for the UK.

Bilateral relations in Europe after 2016?

Following the 2016 referendum on EU membership, the UK systematically emphasized the ties of partnership with Czechia and Slovakia, emphasizing that both countries matter a lot to the UK. In parallel with the Article 50 EU withdrawal discussions, the British side invariably framed Brexit as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship. The UK invested more energy in broadening and deepening its bilateral relationships with the Czech Republic, rather than Slovakia. Worth mentioning in this respect is the move by the British Embassy in Prague which, in early 2017, took an unexpected initiative and approached the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a proposal intended to create a strategic partnership between the Czech Republic and the UK. The Czech side was genuinely surprised by this sudden request. Surprisingly, nothing came of this proposal

because the Czechs were cautious about how this bilateral initiative might be interpreted by EU partners.

The move to enhanced bilateralism in the wake of Brexit was illustrated further by the fact that the UK strengthened its diplomatic presence in both Prague and Bratislava. There was a tacit understanding among officials in both countries that the increase in bilateral activity came down to the fact that Czechia and Slovakia now wielded more by having a say over the Brexit process within the European Council. As part of a broader tours des capitals, UK diplomacy was perceived as a form of “persuasion”, or “courtship” designed to create solidarity with UK positions in the Brexit talks.

The topic that came up in these conversations was the tricky Irish border issue, which held up Article 50 talks for months during 2018. Apart from the border question, other issues that the UK stressed while embarking on those diplomacy tours of Czechia and Slovakia concerned mostly cooperation in the area of education and scientific cooperation (student mobility, qualifications, collaborative research projects between universities and/or research centres) and internal security (police authorities, information sharing and access to national law-enforcement databases, access to AFSJ agencies). Lastly, two topics, closely connected to Brexit that always came up in bilateral talks were healthcare issues and the UK’s post-Brexit future access to the EU’s satellite navigation system Galileo.

In both countries, so-called *Leges Brexit* were adopted that would provide for a transitional period for UK expatriates living there and guarantee them, within specified areas, the same treatment as if they were EU citizens. The aim was to protect UK expatriates in the event the EU withdrawal negotiations foundered. According to our interviewees, the UK government was very pleased about these measures. Overall, however, both countries proved largely immune to the British divide-and-rule tactics, resulting in a certain degree of frustration on the British side. There was a clear economic logic to prioritizing the EU because trade with the UK could never outweigh the importance of the single market. Indeed, during the Article 50 negotiations, both countries’ positions towards Brexit largely converged with that of the EU institutions. Even in the Czech Republic, a rather Eurosceptic country, the first political priority was to protect the cohesion and integrity of the single market.

Lessons for the future

The evidence base certainly demonstrates the renewed importance of bilateralism for the UK’s engagement with European partners as a consequence of Brexit. Relationships with national capitals across the EU gained a new significance, with the UK assigning greater priority and personnel to European diplomacy after a period of benign neglect. Notwithstanding UK diplomats’ measured language of engaging EU27 countries with the same degree of respect, the UK clearly

sought to make its traditional power asymmetry work to secure its interests in the first phase of Brexit negotiations. This was seen in the manner in which the UK unexpectedly offered a new strategic partnership with Czechia, a sign that the British government considered its stronger economic and security ties with Prague could offer useful leverage as compared with Slovakia. Equally revealing is the fact that the UK side expected to find a receptive audience in Prague for its proposals, thereby making Czechia a test case of the cohesiveness of EU negotiating strategy in phase one of Brexit.

From a reputational perspective, our study suggests that the conduct of the Brexit negotiations seems to have steadily impaired the perception of the UK – renowned for its once great reputation of a trustworthy diplomat and a highly efficient, reliable negotiator – in the eyes of two of the EU’s smaller member states. The way in which the UK negotiated its withdrawal from the EU has been largely perceived as chaotic, unsystematic and prone to ideological excesses. This left traditional UK partners such as Czechia and Slovakia somewhat confused and disappointed. Yet, all of this has been happening at the very exact moment when the UK, which finds itself in the midst of a transformation to post-Brexit diplomacy, needs allies perhaps more than ever before.

The UK’s experience of engaging with European countries bilaterally can thus shed light on the prospects for making a success of Global Britain. Former Prime Minister Theresa May spoke of wanting to build a country “respected around the world”, but the reality, as illustrated by the cases of negotiating Brexit with Czechia and Slovakia, is that EU withdrawal has inflicted reputational costs. As a medium power whose key contribution globally is less its functional capabilities and more its ability to build and maintain alliances across various regions, reputation and soft power are at a premium when trying to act as a global broker. Especially at a time when UK foreign policy is in the process of being recalibrated by making a series of new trade deals, security treaties, and immigration arrangements.

However, divorce from the EU means the UK’s global leadership ambitions on issues such as climate change, free trade, or human rights are premised on enhanced bilateralism in Europe – because the EU is a natural partner on these fronts – as well as other regions. This dual approach thus entails more engagement and associated transaction costs within Europe at a time when the UK can no longer rely on the asymmetry of power vis-a-vis smaller EU countries afforded it within the context of the Brussels institutional architecture. Instead, UK politicians will need to work harder on developing personal chemistry with their counterparts and rely more on smarter diplomacy that prepares the ground for bilateral exchanges. Overall though, Global Britain is useful as a placeholder for post-Brexit foreign relations but strategically it is a gamble because it risks promising far more than the UK can deliver to its partners.