Chapter 1
Brexit in the Time of Coronavirus

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Abstract The departure of the UK from the EU has been a kaleidoscope of surprises—the initial shock of the 2016 referendum, two unexpected elections, the revolving door at 10 Downing Street and the succession of missed promised deadlines from 29 March 2019 until the final severance of British EU membership on 31 January 2020. Informed commentators were united in their expectation that the negotiations between the UK and the EU on the shape of the new bilateral relationship would inevitably dominate public, media and political agendas for much of 2020. Yet, barely 1 month after the UK’s departure, this seeming certainty was fundamentally compromised by the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, it may prove to be the case that for the EU, somethings are currently more important and enduring—both politically and economically—than Brexit.

This chapter eschews a detailed account of the Brexit campaign that emerged at the 2014 European Parliament elections and culminated in the 23 June 2016 referendum outcome, preferring a longer historical context as a partial explanation for Brexit. This historical perspective is juxtaposed with a contemporary focus even if at the time of writing the June 2020 extension deadline decision remained pending—making predictions on the negotiation process somewhat precarious. Additionally, consideration is given to the consequences of the UK’s departure for the EU27’s credibility, reputation and capacity in a global context. Finally, the chapter presents unique data on the transformation in media reporting on the EU in Asia. From an extended period after 2016 when the vast majority of Asia’s EU news was devoted to Brexit, in March 2020, the pandemic issue emerged as more newsworthy and of greater salience and has impacted on perceptions and expectations of the EU. Brexit was no longer the headline story.

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K. Haba and M. Holland (eds.), Brexit and After,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-7969-1_1
1 A History of Ambivalence

Unanticipated surprises are something of a motif for the UK’s relationship with the European integration process as a review of the past 70 years lays bare. A history of reluctance, antagonism and scepticism has (with one exception) typically characterised relations under the nine UK Prime Ministers—irrespective of party—that have held office since 1973. Indeed, the UK holds the rare distinction to have been the only state to be rejected twice for membership (1963 and 1967), to have held two referendums after joining (1975 and 2016) and as of 2020, the first country to activate Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to formally end membership. The 2016 referendum result should not have come as such a surprise to anyone with an understanding of this troubled history.

Albeit two or more generations ago, the UK’s initial scepticism towards post-war Franco-German reconciliation signalled general British disbelief in the European integration process. Had the UK accepted the invitation to participate in the founding meetings including that in Messina in 1955, the trajectory of European integration would undoubtedly have been different and a Brexit mentality less likely to emerge. A missed leadership opportunity and arguably the greatest post-war mistaken policy choice by Britain.

With the benefit of hindsight, it appears that General de Gaulle was perceptive as well as prescient in his reasoning behind vetoing the UK’s applications for membership in the 1960s. His critique at that time that the UK lacked a real vocation and commitment to European integration other than for commercial reasons has subsequently proved accurate. This antagonism notwithstanding, Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath successfully secured British membership in 1973, if with the dubious claim to have been given the ‘full-hearted consent’ of the British public by winning the 1970 UK General Election. This Europhoria was not fully shared by his successor, Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who—after renegotiating the terms on British membership, became the first UK politician to use a referendum. A degree of national amnesia seems to have affected the memory of the subsequent two-thirds majority in favour of these new terms of membership.

The decade of Margaret Thatcher as UK’s Conservative Party Prime Minister still casts the longest shadow pertaining to Brexit some 30 years on. Demands for a UK financial contribution rebate and her Bruges speech serve as appropriate bookends for the fractious 1980s decade, notwithstanding the success normally associates with Britain’s support for the completion of the ‘1992’ Single Market project. Under her successor, John Major, the British Government did finally force through the parliamentary ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, if at the cost of a fundamental rupture within the Conservative Party that sowed the seeds for Brexit a quarter century later.

The one real exception to this Eurosceptic narrative was articulated by Labour Party Prime Minister Tony Blair who remains the only contemporary British politician to have endorsed, in principle, British membership of the Eurozone and adoption of the common currency (once his five economic tests were achieved—which
they never were). With Blair’s replacement by Gordon Brown, a coherent pro-European Union agenda became less evident, and in 2010, David Cameron became the country’s next Conservative Party Prime Minister, albeit of a coalition government. Perhaps ironically, the results in Britain of the 2014 European Parliament election elevated support for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) to previously unknown heights. Based on a turn-out of 35.4%, UKIP topped the poll with 26.6% of the vote and relegated the Conservatives into third place, an outcome that provoked Cameron to follow his ill-fated referendum strategy.

Despite conducting what was, in hindsight, a modest but successful renegotiation of Britain’s terms of membership (related to immigration and the political commitment to ‘an ever closer union’) as well as campaigning for a ‘Yes’ vote in the referendum, the ‘No’ victory effectively undermined the 43-year legacy of his Conservative predecessor Edward Heath and led to Cameron’s own resignation. As the subsequent, 4 years repeatedly illustrated, Brexit, however, was far from done. Theresa May became the fifth Conservative Prime Minister since the UK first joined, called an election in which she lost her majority, belatedly triggered Article 50 and after 15 months of fraught negotiations signed a 585-page withdrawal agreement with the EU: in July 2018 a White Paper on ‘The Future Relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union’ was finally introduced. The tone was, however, strident, announcing:

… ending the days of sending vast sums of money to the EU every year. We will take back control of our money, laws, and borders, and begin a new exciting chapter in our nation’s history.1

Despite this jingoism, the parliamentary legislation needed to ratify this agreement was defeated on four occasions provoking European Council President Donald Tusk to utter his memorably frank comment about that ‘special place in hell’ for ‘those who promoted Brexit without even a sketch of a plan of how to carry it out safely’.2 The original Brexit deadline of 29 March 2019 was missed culminating in May’s eventual resignation and ultimate replacement by Boris Johnson by the summer of 2019.

Johnson too negotiated a (remarkably similar) Withdrawal Agreement with the EU but faced with a similar road-block to May, missed the new 31 October departure deadline. The deadlock was only resolved after Johnson was able to engineer a snap-election and subsequently secure a landslide majority at the December 2019 General Election with the promise to ‘get Brexit Done’. Legally leaving—as the UK did on 31st January 2020—has far from ended Brexit, however.

By the end of February 2020, Commission President von der Leyen announced optimistically that the EU mandate stood ‘ready to build a close, ambitious partnership with the UK’.3 Negotiations on this new relationship commenced in early

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1https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-future-relationship-between-the-united-kingdom-and-the-european-union/the-future-relationship-between-the-united-kingdom-and-the-european-union-html-version.
2https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-47143135.
3@vonderleyen#newbeginnings.
March 2020 with fortnightly chief negotiators meetings structured around the work of 10 working groups. Perhaps in a sign of goodwill, it was agreed the working language would be just English; however, pessimism had surfaced by the end of the first round of negotiations (held face-to-face in Brussels and then conducted virtually consequential to the pandemic). As reflected in the conclusion offered by the EU’s chief negotiator, Michael Barnier:

To be completely frank with you … there are many divergences and they are very serious divergences’ … such as competition rules, fisheries and future oversight of the UK-EU relationship. 4

The end of June 2020 was set as the deadline for deciding whether to extend the negotiation period beyond the end of the year—something that legally required both the UK and the EU to endorse. The UK, however, consistently and repeatedly asserted that it would not request any such extension, opting not to use the legitimate excuse of the pandemic to force a delay. A tweet from the UK’s chief negotiator, David Frost, made this clear as late as mid-April 2020: Extending would simply prolong negotiations, create even more uncertainty, leave us liable to pay more to the EU in future and keep us bound by evolving EU laws at a time when we need to control our own affairs. In short, it is not in the UK’s interest to extend. 5

The British assessment of progress after the third round of negotiations concluded (by video-link) in mid-May 2020 were no more encouraging: again, according to David Frost,

we made very little progress towards agreement of the most significant outstanding issues between us… The major obstacle … is the EU’s insistence on including a set of novel and unbalanced proposals on the so-called ‘level playing field’…

It is hard to understand why the EU insists on an ideological approach which makes it more difficult to reach a mutually beneficial agreement. 6

If this position prevails, at the end of the transition period, only the barest bones of a new framework for relations will be in place beyond the minimum WTO provisions that apply to trade between all countries and perhaps possible temporary sectoral arrangements. And worryingly, whatever emerges will also have to go through the normal ratification processes including a European Parliament Strasbourg plenary session (scheduled for November 2020). As Barnier noted, the EU would not agree with a deal ‘at any price’ fore-warning that there would be ‘complex, demanding negotiations’. 7

The only thing that seemed certain was that as of 1 January 2021 the current transition conditions would cease to apply and the UK could claim to have regained its pre-1973 sovereignty. For the EU, at this point, the UK would assume the legal status of a normal third country.

4https://euobserver.com/brexit/147645.
5https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-52313042.
6https://twitter.com/DavidGHFrost?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor.
7https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-51623444.
2 The EU27 in today’s Global Context

Parallel to the vagaries of the Brexit negotiation process, simultaneously the EU27 have sought to reassert their identity, deepen solidarity and reassure the world that Brexit would not reduce the EU’s international capability.

Contrary to some media speculation, the EU27 remains of fundamental importance within the current context of global disruption—whether created by Trump, Putin, Xi Jinping or Covid19. With the departure of the UK the collective international weight of the EU has clearly changed. The EU27 population was reduced to 434 million and the EU budget expected to fall by around 15%. And only France now reflected EU common interests on the UN Security Council as a permanent member. Yet the EU still accounts for around 20% of global GDP, represents over 15% of global two-way trade, ranks first for FDI and is by far the world’s leading ODA contributor. France, Germany and Italy occupy three seats of the G7 as well as G20, which also grants a seat to the EU. On balance, the predictions of a shrinking EU in the wake of Brexit have largely been found wanting and EU solidarity has remained remarkably high since the 23 June 2016 UK referendum—future expansion in membership rather than other countries leaving the EU seems more likely. In the most recently released Standard Eurobarometer, 70% of the surveyed Europeans valued being citizens of the EU. In addition, EU citizens showed more trust in the EU than in their national government: 43% of the surveyed respondents trusted the EU, while the figure for national governments and parliaments was just 34%.

From a contemporary strategic perspective, the EU refined and refocused its international role with the publication of the 2016 *European Union Global Strategy* (EUGS). This 50-page consensus-based document was developed over the 2015/16 period and consequently, the UK was involved in its formulation. The timing for release of the EUGS was noteworthy although potentially unhelpful, occurring just 4 days after the Brexit referendum result! Remarkably perhaps, the EUGS appeared largely unaltered by Brexit, other than a modified preamble from the then High Representative Frederica Mogherini:

In challenging times, a strong Union is one that thinks strategically, shares a vision and acts together. This is even more true after the British referendum.

The EUGS sets out the EU’s self-perception of its international role—the term ‘global’ refers to both the all-of-the-world focus and to the comprehensive and conscious linking of different policy sectors to increase the EU’s impact. Initiated under the former High Representative Mogherini and continued subsequently by High Representative Josep Borrell, the EUGS underlines the EU’s desire and intention to play an important international role in every forum. Brexit seems not to have diminished this ambition even if the capabilities that the EU can now call on may have inevitably changed.

This change in the EU’s image—from 28 to now 27 member states—by chance coincided with EU’s normal quinquennial change in its leadership. By the end of

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8Standard Eurobarometer (2019).

9EU Global Strategy (2016).
2019, leadership position replacements had taken place in all five EU institutions—the Presidents of the Council, the European Parliament, the Commission, the European Central Bank and the foreign policy High Representative. For the first time since 1973, there was no UK member of the Commission, and in part to dispel any lowering of expectations around the EU’s global role, the incoming President Ursula von der Leyen created the EU’s first so-called ‘Geo-political’ Commission to underline this new post-Brexit EU agenda.

3 Media Reporting of the EU

The findings from a series of international studies conducted since 2015 have consistently shown that the international news media have enjoyed a diet of Euroscepticism and subsequent Brexit in its framing of the European Union. Historically, this media Brexit preoccupation has been especially marked within the Asia–Pacific region. Consequently, the news coverage of the post-Brexit transition negotiations that commenced in the first quarter of 2020 was expected to continue to dominate the reporting of EU news. This trajectory came to an abrupt halt and the media’s attention in the Asia–Pacific jettisoned their previous obsession with Brexit and overwhelmingly refocused their analysis of the EU around Covid-19 rather than Brexit.

The accompanying data presented here comes from a Jean Monnet Network grant commenced in 2020 and is focused on how the media reports the EU in three countries—China, Japan and Indonesia. These have consistently and historically been the Asian countries where the EU has been reported the most and serve as a good indicator of EU news framing. The data represents all EU news stories reported in March 2020 in 10 monitored newspapers (three each in China and Indonesia, four in Japan). This short snapshot was chosen to coincide with the first round of the Brexit transition negotiations and where media interest would be presumed to be high.

Comparable traditional press was chosen: for Japan, this was Yomiuri Shimbun, Asahi Shimbun, Nihon Keizai Shimbun, the Japan Times; for China People’s Daily, Economic Daily, China Daily; and for Indonesia Kompas, Bisnis Indonesia, The Jakarta Post. In the three Chinese newspapers, there were a total of 171 EU-related news stories, roughly two news items a day (a level similar to previous studies over the last decade). For Japan, the total was 239, again replicating the usual pattern historically found of around three news stories a day (see Fig. 1). In contrast, Indonesia seemed considerably less interested in EU news and recorded just a total of 61 news

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10Holland and Chaban (2018, 2015).
11Renewal versus Global Disruption—Asia’s Expectations of the EU (EXPECT): Jean Monnet Project No. 611168-EPP-1–2019-1-NZ-EPPJMO-NETWORK.
As noted above, the first round of post-Brexit negotiations proper commenced in the first week of March 2020 and intensified media interest was anticipated to reflect this next stage in the process. Table 1 shows that the media across all three countries prioritized the emergence of Covid-19 in Europe in their EU reporting and although the level of overall EU news coverage remained familiar, the focus of the reporting on EU news underwent a remarkable transformation. Over half of these EU news reports related to the pandemic, except in the Indonesia popular daily *Kompas* (but Brexit was not a focus of attention in *Kompas* either).

The reporting of Covid-19 peaked in the third week (15th–21st) of March, the period when the outbreak of Covid-19 began to receive serious acknowledgement

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12Data used in all the Tables are from the EXPECT research project’s as yet unpublished findings.
Table 2  EU-related news reporting on Covid-19 in Asian four popular dailies

| Month of March: | 1–7 | 8–15 | 16–21 | 22–31 |
|----------------|-----|------|-------|-------|
| People’s daily | 1   | 6    | **11**| 7     |
| Yomiuri Shimbun| 6   | **16**| 20    | 9     |
| Asahi Shimbun  | 2   | 5    | **16**| 4     |
| Kompas         | 0   | 2    | 1     | 3     |

in Europe, especially in Italy. There was a commensurate decline in the coverage of Brexit (see Tables 2 and 3 and Figs. 2 and 3).

Examples of these trends were most clearly evident in both Japanese mainstream dailies. Historically, Japanese media has been more interested in reporting Brexit

![Fig. 2](image1.png)

**Fig. 2** EU-related news reporting on Covid-19 in Asian popular dailies

![Fig. 3](image2.png)

**Fig. 3** EU-related news that mentioned Brexit in Japanese and Chinese popular dailies
than its Asian counterparts. It was still the case in the data of March 2020, yet, a shift of interest was obvious. Of the total of 73 and 53 EU stories reported during March 2020 in the Yomiuri Shimbun and Asahi Shimbun respectively, Covid-19-related EU news accounted for 70% (51) and 51% (27) of these stories. The comparable figures in China during the same period saw 60% (25 out of 42) of EU news published in The People’s Daily focused on EU-Covid-19 stories. Indeed, if March is divided at the midpoint, for every publication between two-thirds and 80% of their Covid-19 EU news was published in the last 2 weeks on the month.

The dramatic change in direction for the Chinese and Japanese media emerges in early March (Table 3). In both countries, EU-related stories on Brexit peaked in the first week of March (coinciding with the first round of negotiations in Brussels) before falling off dramatically to low single figures or even no Brexit stories for the remainder of the month. Overall, such Brexit news accounted for just three stories in The People’s Daily (representing a mere 7% of the EU-related news that month) 12 (16%) in the Yomiuri Shimbun and 9 (17%) in the Asahi Shimbun. While all three news articles in The People’s Daily focused on the lack of agreement between the EU and the UK in the post-Brexit negotiation, only 3 out of the 12 pieces of news which mentioned Brexit in Yomiuri Shimbun shared such interest. The other news items merely mentioned Brexit on the sideline as a trivial backdrop. Similarly, only a single news item in Asahi Shimbun had Brexit as the focus, the rest mentioned Brexit in one or even just half a sentence. Finally, even given that the Indonesian media’s general interest in the EU was close to non-existent, there was just a single Brexit-related story published that month.

The outlying exception to this was the business-oriented daily Nihon Keizai Shimbun in Japan and the English-language daily China Daily in China. In March 2020, 41 (out of 161) news articles from Nihon Keizai Shimbun as well as nine articles (out of 79) from China Daily mentioned Brexit. While these two newspapers showed a clear interest in Brexit compared with their counterparts, Nihon Keizai Shimbun and China Daily still only devoted 6% and 8% of their EU-related coverage on Brexit, respectively, in March 2020, while 43% and 53% of their EU-related coverage, respectively, focused on Covid-19. In general, Brexit and its related trade issues, contrary to expectation, seemed to no longer cast such a dominant shadow over the Asian media’s framing of the EU.

Table 3 EU-related news that mentioned Brexit in selected Asian popular dailies

| Month of March: | 1–7 | 8–15 | 16–21 | 22–31 |
|----------------|-----|------|-------|-------|
| People’s daily | 2   | 0    | 1     | 0     |
| Yomiuri Shimbun| 7   | 1    | 3     | 1     |
| Asahi Shimbun  | 5   | 3    | 0     | 1     |
| Kompas         | 0   | 0    | 0     | 1     |
| Nihon Keizai Shimbun | 17 | 12   | 5     | 7     |
4 The EU in Social Media

Arguably Brexit was a social media phenomenon *par excellence*, used by both the Leave and Remain campaigns in 2016 and subsequently by a broad range of activists who contributed to the subsequent 43 months of political debate in the UK. After January 2020, the role of social media became an important element within the transitional negotiations process as understood within the Asia–Pacific region. Mirroring the traditional media structure outlined above, the level of EU news as well as the proportions devoted to post-Brexit issues and Covid-19 EU-related news during March 2020 is examined as used by six official social media platforms encompassing Twitter, Facebook and Weibo (see Table 4). As shown in Fig. 4, there was quite a wide variation in the use of social media platforms; the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in Indonesia and China were active users, whereas the equivalent ministry in Japan almost never engaged in this form of digital diplomacy. Conversely of the three EU delegations, the one based in Tokyo was by far the most frequent user (on Twitter). Overall, China was the leading location for this type of public diplomacy.

Table 4 Social media platforms monitored in China, Indonesia and Japan

| China | Indonesia | Japan |
|-------|-----------|-------|
| Weibo account of EU delegation to China EU in China | Facebook account of EU delegation to Indonesia EU in Indonesia | Twitter account of EU delegation to Japan EU in Japan |
| Weibo account of Europe desk China ministry of foreign affairs 中欧信使 | Twitter account of delegation Europe III of Indonesia MFA Direktorat eropa 3 kemlu RI | Twitter account of Mission of Japan to the EU Japan mission EU |

Fig. 4 Level of Social Media activity of the monitored account in three Asian countries, March 2020
Although the social media accounts run by Delegation for European affairs of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Indonesia Ministry of Foreign Affairs were active in posting in March 2020, their posts seldom featured the EU (Fig. 5). The social media accounts that were run by the EU delegations in third countries were the ones responsible for contributing to online appearance of the Union.

What was striking was that of the 12 social media posts about the EU made by the MFAs in China and Japan, not one concerned Brexit! Among the 110 posts which featured the EU from the accounts of the three EU delegations, none mentioned Brexit either. Contrary to the absence of interest in Brexit, Covid-19 was not unsurprisingly drawing increasing attention in March 2020, and as Table 5 illustrates, only China’s MFA released posts on the topic of the EU and the pandemic (accounting for 10 of their 85 posts in March). The EU’s own Delegations certainly became more vocal as the month progressed. Around half of all posts made by each of the three regional EUDs in March profiled this topic (26 by the Tokyo EUD, 27 in Beijing and 9 in Jakarta).

![Fig. 5](image)

**Table 5** Public diplomacy social media posts on the EU and Covid-19, March 2020

| Month of March: | 1–7 | 8–14 | 15–21 | 22–31 |
|-----------------|-----|------|-------|-------|
| MFA China       | 0   | 2    | 6     | 2     |
| MFA Indonesia   | 0   | 0    | 0     | 0     |
| MFA Japan       | 0   | 0    | 0     | 0     |
| EUD China       | 1   | 0    | 12    | 14    |
| EUD Indonesia   | 0   | 0    | 3     | 6     |
| EUD Japan       | 2   | 5    | 6     | 13    |
These data—both for the traditional and social media—pose questions for the strategy of the EU’s public diplomacy post-Brexit and during the pandemic. Counter-intuitively, the traditional media seemed to be the more receptive vehicle for profiling the EU, even if the focus shifted dramatically from Brexit dominating the conversation to one where the visibility of the EU was subsumed within the Covid-19 framework. It was almost as if a Brexit vaccine had been found eradicating it from the public’s attention in Asia.

5 Economics Beyond Brexit

As other chapters in this collection discuss, the projections of the trade and economic consequences of Brexit for the EU are numerous, varied and frequently pessimistic. These analyses will remain at best speculative in the medium term and of course fundamentally affected by the terms agreed during the 2020 transition period. The possible contours of the EU27’s future economic and trade identity can be traced partially through the EU negotiating mandate and the points of disagreement alluded to already in this chapter.

The EU has argued for an overarching agreement, covering all aspects of future relations: foreign policy, security cooperation, fish, trade, services, research, development and more. All disputes would be referred to a single arbitration panel and the European Court of Justice would have the final word on any aspects touching EU law. For the EU27, any final ‘agreement should uphold common high standards, and corresponding high standards over time with Union standards as a reference point’. Specifically, this would apply ‘in the areas of state aid, competition, state-owned enterprises, social and employment standards, environmental standards, climate change, relevant tax matters and other regulatory measures and practices in these areas’. Conversely, the UK’s ambition was significantly different and was to secure a ‘comprehensive’ free trade (CFTA) (similar to the EU-Canada FTA) with extra agreements (such as for fishing) negotiated separately and governed by separate dispute resolution mechanisms. Importantly, as we have noted above, the UK rejects the “level-playing field” concerns of the EU over maintaining similar standards for environmental, labour and state aid regulations.

As the 2020 negotiations passed the midpoint, the litany of perceived issues remained unresolved. In addition to the lack of a common consensus on the broad “level playing field”/state aid conditions, sectoral challenges were extensive covering services, security and data sharing, fishing, the application of a ‘reference point’ and even—potentially—the re-litigation of the Gibraltar issue. All that seemed certain

13 Council Decision (EU, Euratom) 2020/266 of 25 February 2020 authorising the opening of negotiations with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for a new partnership agreement ST/5870/2020/INIT.

14 The Future Relationship with the EU. The UK’s Approach to Negotiations, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/868874/The_Future_Relationship_with_the_EU.pdf.
was—whatever the outcome—a new trading regime would be established, the EU’s Single Market freedoms protected, and parameters of EU-UK trade changed. And yet, while Brexit was predicted to be the greatest single economic challenge to face the EU this decade, the pandemic has no longer made this the case. While in 2021, the EU27 will remain the world’s biggest trader of goods and services and second largest economy, the economic impact of Covid-19 is expected to be significant and greater than Brexit. The European Commission’s May 2020 forecast expected the Eurozone to contract by a record 7.75% in 2020 before growing by 6.25% in 2021. The EU-wide economy will be similarly affected initially contracting by 7.5% before growing by around 6% in 2021. The sharpest declines were predicted for Greece (9.7%), Italy (9.5%) and in Spain (9.4%), with this downturn estimated to likely be significantly worse than the 2009 crisis, when the EU economy contracted by 4.5%. An uneven recovery among member states could also threaten the stability of the Euro. Public debt within the Eurozone is expected to increase to 102.7% of GDP in 2020, up from 86% with the debt ratio for Eurozone’s third largest economy—Italy—particularly precarious at 158.9% predicted for 2020. As Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni noted on 6 May 2020, ‘It is now quite clear that the EU has entered the deepest economic recession in its history’. It may prove to be the case that some things are more important—and possibly more enduring—than Brexit, a conclusion that was all but unthinkable before Covid-19. Just as Brexit in part was a reaction against the free movement of people and the commitment to deeper integration across a broader spectrum of policy domains, Covid-19 has presented brutal challenges to some of the integration process’s most sacred principles. The open borders of Schengen, subsidiarity and assigning responsibilities between the EU and its Member States and even the scale of the EU budget and the concept of debt mutualisation. It may be difficult to disentangle the individual impacts of Brexit and Covid-19, but together they herald a new experience for solidarity. Only time will tell if this experience will enhance or diminish integration for the EU27.

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