Post-Brexit Europeanization: re-thinking the continuum of British policies, polity, and politics trajectories

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Abstract
What is the impact of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU on British policies, polity and politics and their future trajectories? This question has been overlooked so far, as many observers have focused on the identity, cultural, and political reasons behind the Brexit vote or scrutinized closely the process of withdrawal. The de-Europeanization literature has tried to capture the new dynamics behind the impact of Brexit on the domestic scene by understanding it as a will to dismantle policies and politics previously Europeanized. On the contrary, we argue here that Brexit is not necessarily the end of UK’s engagement with the EU. This editorial and this special issue provide a more nuanced explanation and support the idea that Brexit is not putting an end to the EU’s influence over British public policies. In fact, we identify several pathways to the EU–UK relationship which can be conceptualized along a continuum from de-Europeanization to re-engagement scenarios. Building on the literature that has suggested the trajectories of disengagement and de-Europeanization, this editorial more specifically contributes to the debate by coining the concept of continued engagement and re-engagement and highlighting the need to analyse British politics, policies, and polity in relation to the EU through a variety of pathways.

Keywords Post-Brexit public policy · (De-)Europeanisation · Disengagement · Re-engagement · Politicization · EU-UK relationship

Introduction

The exit from the EU by one of its member states is unprecedented. Consequently, the drivers behind the Leave vote have been extensively analysed by academics. Various reasons have been emphasized: the global cultural backlash and the rise of populism (Norris and Inglehart 2019), the role of austerity politics and of global
economics (Fetzer 2019), the role of domestic British politics and divisions on Europe amongst British political parties (Menon and Salter 2016) and the contribution of UKIP (Ford and Goodwin 2017). The novelty of the withdrawal from the EU also led many scholars to study the very cumbersome process Brexit initiated at the domestic level, leading to the production of an academic literature on the Withdrawal Agreement, the role of Westminster and the support from the Tories to the whole process (e.g. McConnell and Tormey 2020; Martill 2021). As we are moving into new governance arrangements for the implementation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), a lot of attention has also been devoted to the formal and procedural agreement (e.g. Usherwood 2021; Eckes and Leino-Sandberg 2022).

So far however there is little knowledge on the concrete consequences the withdrawal has on domestic politics and policies in the UK. This special issue starts from the assumption that the withdrawal does not necessarily mean a complete rupture with the EU and that, after 47 years of membership, the effects of Europeanization are still present on the domestic British scene and could take different trajectories in the future. Here we engage with Radaelli’s comprehensive definition of Europeanization (2001, p. 108) as “processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies”.

Based on this definition, the exit from the EU raises new research questions on British politics and policies which have been transformed under the influence of the EU: will Brexit automatically put an end to the Europeanization process? Or could it lead to a ‘reverse gear’ dismantling some of the EU acquis so far, as suggested by the slogan ‘Brexit means Brexit’? Or will withdrawal from the EU have a more diversified and perhaps unexpectedly limited impact, with Europeanization having lasting effects even once the UK is no longer a member State?

This special issue argues that there is not a single scenario, but rather multiple pathways to exiting the EU for British politics, polity, and policies. The special issue shows that there are historical legacies determining the current and future trajectories of EU’s influence. Thus, although Brexit is now a reality, the road towards exiting EU public policies is not a straightforward one and requires further conceptualization. We distinguish in this special issue four varieties of pathways towards exiting to think about the influence of the EU on British public policies and politics: de-Europeanization, disengagement, re-engagement and continued engagement. These scenarios can be placed on a continuum, showing that Brexit is not the end of Europeanization but rather the start of a process that calls for a nuanced reflection on the future relationship with the EU and its impact on British domestic politics and policies, and even polities to a certain extent.

Building on the existing work of de-Europeanization and disengagement, we make three main contributions to this emerging literature. Firstly, we propose two new concepts, re-engagement and continued engagement, to fully capture the plurality of (non-) changes following Brexit. Instead of assuming the post-Brexit pathways of British politics and policies as fixed categories, we analyse Brexit as a constantly evolving process and hence offer to think about these four roads along a continuum.
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ranging from de-Europeanization to continued engagement (see Fig. 1). Secondly, we further operationalize our four conceptual tools through the use of two main criteria: the dismantling, or not, of what has been previously Europeanized and the continuation, or not, of active Europeanization. Finally, this special issue explores some key variables, explaining why one path rather than another is witnessed: while the pre-existing degree of Europeanization of British politics and policies play a role, we defend the idea that the way this Europeanization process occurs, the structuration of the field, and the degree of politicization are factors that influence the post-Brexit trajectories.

This introductory article is built as follows. Following a literature review of the existing literature on Europeanization, de-Europeanization and disengagement, section two defines the concepts of re-engagement and continued engagement, and sets up our conceptual framework. Based on the examination of the scholarship devoted to existing developments so far in British domestic policies, section three outlines the contributions of this special issue which illustrate the varieties of post-withdrawal trajectories. Finally we conclude on how the different trajectories that British public policies and politics have taken in a post-Brexit world, might re-define its relationship with the EU.

Reversing the gear of Europeanization: de-Europeanization and disengagement

De-Europeanization can be broadly defined as the ‘reverse gear’ (Gravey 2016) of Europeanization. For a long time, the existing scholarship has been mainly dedicated to the ‘forward gear’ of Europeanization to understand the convergence between member States and to shed light to a certain extent on the potential domestic resistance to these processes. In contrast, the concept of de-Europeanization is relatively new in the academic field and has been extensively used to study different phenomena which lead to a back-pedaling and thus question the interactions between the
EU and its member States. Brexit is one of them. Indeed, ‘Brexit means Brexit’ is possibly the best summary of what de-Europeanization could mean and it is the first time that this process is so clearly tangible within the EU with one of its larger member states deciding to withdraw from the union. This section reviews the literature that has explored the concept of de-Europeanization, then discusses how part of the literature has looked at Brexit as a case ‘par excellence’ of de-Europeanization, before complexifying the situation.

Europeanization has been intensively studied and has led to scholarly debates about whether it is a top-down (Wessels and Rometsch 1993), bottom-up (Börzel 2002) or multi-directional process (Radaelli 2003). In terms of scope, scholars have debated the extent to which it is mostly the outcome of formal institutions (Ladrech 1994) or informal ones (Radaelli 2001). A consensus has nonetheless appeared on the idea that Europeanization needs to be distinguished from mere convergence, notably by considering national institutions as filtering EU developments and hence being able to resist Europeanization (Risse et al. 2001).

Since the Eurozone crisis and ensuing migration crisis and pandemic, which have impacted EU governance, recent work has explored the possibility of a halt in the Europeanization process or even of a ‘reverse gear’ of the previous transformations (Gravey 2016). This is what the concept of de-Europeanization proposes to capture, yet in relation to very different phenomena. Some scholars have defined de-Europeanization as all the dynamics aiming at ‘less harmonization, and less collective action, all possibly augmented by resistance at the national level’ (Radaelli and Salter 2019, p. 36). De-Europeanization could be witnessed in the defence of national interests leading to an opposition of the EU being granted additional powers (Copeland 2016), in the resistance to implement EU legislation (Raagmaa et al. 2014) or in the most extreme case in the ‘dismantling’ of EU policies i.e. the ‘cutting, diminution or removal’ (Jordan et al. 2013, p. 795) of EU policies. Some dismantling has occurred at the EU level following the adoption of the ‘better regulation’ strategy by the European Commission or in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis (e.g. Gravey 2016; Steinebach and Knill 2017 for environmental policies), with the European Commission withdrawing some of its legislative proposals for instance. The national level has also been the locus of some dismantling of what has been previously Europeanized, for instance the 2011 Hungarian Constitution removing some EU acquis (rights for minorities, independent justice, diversity of media, etc.) (Leontitsis and Ladi 2018). To some extent one could argue that the refusal of the UK to engage in the second generation of asylum directives, and a selective engagement marked since the 2010s on immigration and asylum, had some dismantling effect for the Common European Asylum System as a whole and in particular for the rights of asylum seekers within the EU (El-Enany 2017).

For other scholars, de-Europeanization equates to a ‘progressive detachment (…) from the political, administrative and normative influence of the European Union and/or by a more overt and growing contestation over the EU or its policies’ (Tomini and Gürkan 2021, p. 286). Drawing from the case of Turkey (e.g. Yılmaz 2015; Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber 2016; Ertugal 2021; Tomini and Gürkan 2021) and to a lesser extent on Serbia (Castaldo and Pinna 2018) and Central and Eastern European States (Àgh 2015; Szymański 2017), these scholars conceive de-Europeanization in
a deeper and broader way in comparison with those mentioned above: de-European-
ization is not restricted to resistance to change or to a removal of what has changed
under the influence of the EU, but rather relates to a loss of EU attractivity due to
processes of ‘autocratization’ (Öniş and Kutlay 2019; Tomini and Gürkan 2021) or
‘de-democratization’ (Àgh 2015; Ertugal 2021).

Another part of the existing literature has used de-Europeanization to qualify the
‘polycrisis’ the EU seems to be enduring. Here, de-Europeanization is understood
as a form of dis-integration (Murphy and O’Brennan 2019, p. 474) or of differenti-
ated dis-integration (Leruth et al. 2019). Starting with the creation of a ‘Europe à
la carte’ with the Maastricht Treaty, these dynamics have intensified with succes-
vie EU enlargements and the ‘polycrisis’ ongoing since 2008. In this specific mean-
ing, de-Europeanization can be understood in relation to the end of the ‘permissive
consensus’ and the growing politicization of EU integration (De Wilde et al. 2016;
Leruth et al. 2019).

Despite these divergences on the meanings and mechanisms of de-European-
ization, Brexit appears at first as the materialization of this ‘reverse gear.’ Exam-
ples of resistance to European integration were already multiple before 2016. For
instance, the UK resisted the adoption at the EU level of new national targets in
the framework of Europe 2020 and the European Semester, advocating for a more
decentralized approach in relation to employment policy. Through this decision, the
coalition government ‘reversed the procedural and cognitive shifts that had occurred
under its predecessor [New Labour government]’ (Copeland 2016, p. 1136) In so
doing, it displayed a deliberate will of dismantling the politics and policies previ-
ously Europeanized with the aim to ‘prevent future uploading and downloading in
the governance process’ (Copeland 2016, p. 1126). The 2016 referendum campaign
exacerbated this dynamic, being mostly about affirming the need for British citizens
to regain national sovereignty and control over their identity, borders, laws, budgets,
etc. This is well illustrated by the mottos of the Leave campaign to ‘Take Back Con-
trol’ and of Theresa May declaring that ‘Brexit means Brexit’. Therefore, scholars
have interpreted these events as ‘an intention to de-Europeanize’ (Burns et al. 2019,
p. 273) insofar as they appear as an ‘opportunity for wide-ranging reform at the
domestic level to ‘roll back’ decades of embedded EU policy’ (Radaelli and Salter
2019).

Building on the work of Burns et al. (2019) we question these claims on de-Euro-
peanization and argue instead that it is possible to consider that Brexit has also led
to a continuation or an acceleration of Europeanization dynamics. Thus, confronted
to the prospect to leave the EU, British legislators have hastened the transposition
of EU law before the effective withdrawal of 2020. Various citizen-led marches to
demonstrate the British public’s attachment to the EU were also historical. In some
policy areas de-Europeanization did not take place due to a lack of political will,
or capability at the domestic level. This scenario of ‘passive de-Europeanization’
has been visible in the field of environmental policies where the UK is not nec-
essarily able to produce fundamentally different public policies than from the EU.
This is explained as following some transfer of powers and prerogatives to the EU
level the UK does not hold sufficient expertise to innovate (Burns et al. 2019).
There are therefore two possible scenarios to consider: ‘failed de-Europeanization’
and ‘passive de-Europeanization’, which can be labelled as ‘disengagement’, corresponding to situations in which ‘a state retreating from active Europeanization, maintaining the domestic processes and structures affected by Europeanization, but not seeking to adapt them further to the EU’s influence’ (Burns et al. 2019, p. 273). Disengagement has led to different results in comparison with de-Europeanization: while Brexit puts an end to the active Europeanization of domestic policies and politics, no dismantling can be observed. Therefore, contrary to de-Europeanization having noticeable consequences on the short-term due to a sudden ‘reverse gear’, when disengagement occurs changes are only observable on a longer term perspective. In this scenario, change is not occurring immediately. Politics and policies remain as they were before Brexit, but the end of the domestic alignment with the EU acquis leads to diverging pathways between the EU and the UK.

The reality of post-Brexit British politics and policies is thus more complex than just a scenario of ‘reverse gear’. The following section proceeds to examine the possible trajectories more deeply by proposing the complementary concepts of re-engagement and continued engagement.

Forward gear: conceptualizing continued engagement and re-engagement in the diversity continuum of post-Brexit pathways with Europe

The existing literature has started to demonstrate how de-Europeanization is far from being the only path to be envisioned beyond the withdrawal of the EU for British polity, politics and policies. Yet the varieties of these (non)-changes have not been adequately conceptualized, and even the literature on disengagement is not sufficient to capture all the nuances. We therefore propose to work around a continuum and to add the concepts of continued engagement and re-engagement (see Fig. 1). These concepts assume that Brexit did not necessarily put an end to active Europeanization. Instead, the EU maintains some influence on Britain’s domestic stage while the UK keeps uploading its model, practices, priorities, etc., albeit from the position of a third country. More specifically these two concepts enrich our conceptualization of the different trajectories of British politics and policies in relation to Europe along a continuum. Beyond Brexit, Europe’s role on the UK domestic scene is one of a variety of pathways in terms of (non)-changes.

On the continuum below, while de-Europeanization is the most extreme case of change, we propose to add continued engagement at the opposite end of the scale; where any transformation of the interactions between the EU and the domestic levels are almost imperceivable and interaction continues as before the effective withdrawal from the EU. Methodologically, in order to assess which path corresponds the most to the post-Brexit configuration, and drawing from the existing literature, two questions need to be answered:

1. Are pre-Europeanized politics and policies being dismantled following the UK withdrawal from the EU? In other words, is there any removal, reduction or cutting of the existing politics and policies?
2. Are processes of active Europeanization still happening in the aftermath of Brexit? Put differently, is downloading of the EU acquis at the UK level and/or uploading of UK outputs at the EU level still occurring with the same intensity?

As detailed in Fig. 1, de-Europeanization occurs in the case of a deliberate dismantling of what has been previously Europeanized and involves the termination of any interaction between the EU and the domestic levels in the studied politics or policies. Disengagement means the absence of dismantling but the end of active Europeanization. Re-engagement corresponds to situations where the UK, being no longer a member State, must disengage from EU policies but reengages in them as a third country. In this case, not only the Europeanized acquis stays in place, but the UK is also pursuing intensive exchanges with the EU. However, due to the changes of legal status, UK influence on the EU level and the EU one on the domestic stage are more limited than what they used to be when the UK was still a member State. Finally, continued engagement is the scenario where there is no dismantling and Europeanization is continuing as it was before, and thus can be considered as active. The change to a third country status for the UK does not impact the intensity of the uploading and downloading processes, either because it still has the same rights and benefits as other EU member states or because it could create more complex relationships with the EU and its members.

Re-engagement and continued engagement have been frequently observed in this special issue. Re-engagement is visible in the case of police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters. Although when becoming a third country the UK had to leave EU tools in criminal matter and to disengage, the authors observe no dismantlement at the domestic level. Instead there has been a re-engagement and to a lesser extent a form of active Europeanization has been maintained, both in its top-down and bottom-up dimensions. Re-engagement is also the strategy used by the British Council to preserve its reputation that could have been damaged by Brexit. Through the deployment of new narratives and initiatives, the British Council has proven very willing to re-engage in Europe after having focused for years on other regional areas such as its Asian, South American or Easter European audiences. Finally, based on the Brussels effect, Jancic sheds light on the economic and regulatory strings that bind UK Parliament to EU developments beyond the legal commitments, at least on a short term.

Continued engagement is again observable in police cooperation matters. Wolff, Piquet, Carrapico demonstrate that the UK has the same rights and benefits as other EU member states in relation to the Prüm decision or to cybersecurity where the withdrawal from the EU seems to have a limited impact as the UK maintains an identical participation.

Governance structures are also there to maintain forms of diplomatic engagement and thus can enhance or disable future trajectories. A Partnership Council co-chaired by relevant EU Commissioners and UK ministers should meet at least once a year in different configurations. It is assisted by a Trade Partnership Committee and specialized committees on a series of trade and non-trade policy areas. The Partnership Council aims to oversee the attainment of the objectives, to implement the TCA, and adopt decisions where required by the TCA. It should also establish a forum to
resolve disputes (Inst. 13) and adopt a list of arbitrators (inst. 27). The Commission acts based on a formal decision determined by Council decision (Art. 218(9) of the TFEU and all decisions are taken by mutual consent of the co-chairs. EU member states can attend meetings and also send one representative to accompany the Commission but cannot vote and the European Parliament is informed. Maroš Šefčovič, the Vice-President of the European Commission for Interinstitutional Relations should co-chair the Partnership Council. A Joint Civil Society Forum should be composed of employers’ association, trade unions and NGOs, etc. A Dispute Settlement Mechanism has also been introduced. There are also subsidies and fisheries remedial measures as well as safeguard measures in case of serious economic, society or environmental difficulties (inst. 36). Although quite technical in appearance these are the formal structures where the UK will continue to exert influence and negotiate the road of its de-Europeanization and possible disengagement in various policy areas.

Furthermore, the political landscape of the UK has been profoundly changed by the withdrawal from the EU. UK members have left the European Parliament and political parties will not campaign anymore for referendums or European elections, signalling therefore a de facto de-Europeanization of their presence in Brussels. A Parliamentary Partnership Assembly is about to be established in order to provide a forum to exchange views on the partnership and make recommendations to the Partnership Council. There is however no guarantee if or how the UK can continue to exert influence in the future. The context of the new governance structure of the TCA might also bring some additional explanations.

Yet as this special issue goes to print, the Johnson government has decided to make parliamentary scrutiny all the more difficult. In 2022, the government has announced that it will adopt ‘Brexit Freedom bill’ to facilitate the possibility to amend or repeal retained EU law. It seems therefore that de-Europeanization is leading to a battle between the executive and the parliament. Yet the willingness of the Johnson government and its ministers to ‘reform, replace and repeal’ EU law has not been justified adequately nor have new purposeful changes been proposed. However, it does seem like an opportunity at domestic level to tighten parliament democratic scrutiny (White 2022).

The de-Europeanization literature has been criticized for mostly analysing formal and vertical forms of uploading and downloading of national preferences to and from the EU level (Aggestam and Bicchi 2019, p. 515). Informal and horizontal forms have been looked at less but are nonetheless increasingly important in global governance. Mechanisms of cross-loading defined as ‘the mutual influence among member states independent of mediation by EU actors’ (Ibid, p. 515) are increasingly relevant and should not be overlooked in the case of post-Brexit trajectories. This ‘informal side of Europeanization’ pays attention to EU member states who step out of the formal structures of EU governance and exert leadership through cross-loading (Aggestam and Bicchi 2019, p. 516). This kind of ‘satellite cooperation’ has multiplied outside of the formal structures of the EU (Parkes 2011) and in particular as a response to the communitarization and politicization of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) with the Prüm framework or the G6 (Wolff and Mounier 2012), but also of foreign policy, with for instance the E3 grouping of the UK with France.
and Germany. The E3 looks like a strategic venue to coordinate foreign policy coordination. In fact, in the wake of Brexit ‘these trilateral meetings have become more frequent and covered more ground’ (Brattberg 2020). Sixty-seven statements have been signed between 2016 and June 2020 (Ibid.) on a variety of foreign policy issues such as the Middle East Conflict, Russia or Venezuela. In addition, ‘an informal working arrangement’ has been established ‘on the sidelines of the UN Security Council’ (Ibid.). The UK is also part of the European Intervention Initiative, a joint military project between 14 European countries outside of the existing structures of NATO or the EU, led by the French.

Assessing whether the UK participation in these more informal mechanisms falls under continued engagement or re-engagement varies across policy fields. When cross-loading and alternative venues replace formal UK participation to EU tools, it is more accurate to talk in terms of re-engagement. On the contrary, when these fora have been the dominant forms of cooperation between EU member states, the possibility for the UK to maintain its input can be interpreted as aligning with continued engagement.

In addition, these examples raise questions on the mechanisms at the foundation of these different trajectories. In other words, identifying different scenarios requires capturing the variables explaining why one specific path rather than another one is dominating patterns of post-Brexit trajectories. This special issue analyses patterns prevailing in UK policy, polity, and politics.

Policy relates to the degree but also the nature of the Europeanization process in British public policy prior to the effective withdrawal of 2020. Policies where EU influence has been marginal are more likely to be de-Europeanized, especially if these changes have limited costs (from an economic, a social, an organizational perspective, etc.) (Burns et al. 2020). On the contrary, when deep changes have previously occurred and when these changes have been costly, opting for the ‘reverse gear’ is more unlikely. Yet, this assumption does not fully explain what could happen to policies in which Europeanization has not only been top-down, but also bottom-up. Indeed, if the UK has strongly influenced the EU and has turned out to be a norm exporter, few changes at the domestic level might have happened when the UK was still a member of the EU and they were probably not particularly difficult to achieve. In this case, de-Europeanization is not the most plausible scenario as the UK does not have any motive to dismantle the existing policies, especially if it can still influence the EU. Furthermore, due to the obstacles linked to the dismantling of EU policies, there is a high probability of convergence between the EU and the UK and of Europeanization, whether under the form of re-engagement or continued engagement. Consequently, uploading processes, when they exist, could hinder de-Europeanization.

At the polity level, the analysis of the formal decision-making structure of a policy field, in particular its degree of centralization and the presence of ‘veto players’, i.e. ‘the collective or individual actors whose agreement is necessary to change the status quo’ (Tsebelis 2002, p. 19) is key. In this article we define the status quo as the status of Europeanization that existed on the day of the UK’s withdrawal on the 31st December 2020. Here, veto players can prevent de-Europeanization, especially if joint-decision traps occur (Burns et al. 2019). Copeland demonstrates that
the strong centralization of employment policy in the UK, excluding the participation of any veto player to decision-making, explains how Whitehall and the Conservatives easily dismantled and hampered further Europeanization. Nonetheless, centralization could also favour scenarios of re-engagement or continued engagement if the administration has been Europeanized and is in capacity to implement its preferences. Instead in the cases of devolved administrations of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland there has been a vote in favour of remaining in the EU; indicating a possible different trajectory of continued engagement and re-engagement.

Finally, domestic politics can impact post-Brexit pathways, though their effects are complex. Indeed, de-Europeanization could be facilitated by the low visibility of the policy field, leading to minimal opposition and contestation to the removal, cutting or diminishing of existing pre-Europeanized policies, as occurred for employment policy (Copeland 2016). However, Burns et al. (2019), drawing from environmental policies, show that de-Europeanization can on the contrary be favoured by strong politicization, i.e. intense polarization of a topic among public opinion and political elites. Within the UK itself, Brexit has demonstrated the entrenched differences between the Leave and Remain camp. Though in the current context of polarized politics and tension in the EU/UK relationship, one may assume that continued engagement and re-engagement can be facilitated if de-politicized, remaining at the level of technical and operational cooperation. In foreign policy however the war in Ukraine and ensuing crisis could also leave the door open for a visibility of re-engagement and visible rapprochement around the concept of ‘European security’.

The double-edged nature of policy, polity and politics explains the need to think jointly about these three dimensions. This is necessary for instance to consider the impact of the decision-making structure on the post-Brexit path (polity) dependent on the degree of pre-existing Europeanization (policy). Similarly, the policy and politics facets interact: a very politicized policy field leaves less space to Europeanized technical actors to support the status quo while the latter can more easily implement their ideas if the decision-making process is taken out of the political sphere to be handled by technical actors. This is what the contributors to the special issue offer to capture.

Special issue structure

In this special issue, we argue that, in spite of political declarations, the road towards dismantling and de-Europeanizing is not straight forward and needs a nuanced analysis along the continuum proposed in the previous section. We argue that the consequences of exiting the EU depend on various factors contingent upon the pre-existing Europeanization process and mechanisms. We also support the idea that there will be a variety of trajectories in relation to the way the UK (dis)engages from the EU depending on whether we study policy, polity, or politics.

From a polity and politics point of view, we have seen that a series of political crises, beginning with the Eurozone crisis, and including Brexit and the pandemic, have called into question how democracy works in a multi-layered and transnational polity such as the EU. Debates about democracy, and popular vs. state sovereignty
have significantly influenced research on Europeanization of polity/ies (Beetz 2019). And a debate has re-emerged about **popular sovereignty**, which is precisely where Alexandre-Collier’s main contribution lies. Studying how this willingness to re-engage with the people has been instrumentalized by British political elites, and more specifically the Conservative party, Alexandre-Collier shows that it has acted as a means to disengage from the EU. Using P. Mair’s concept of ‘populist democracy’ she provides a detailed comparison of the procedural disengagement undertaken by David Cameron to the substantial disengagement of Boris Johnson. This helps to identify to what extent the re-engagement with the polity away from Europe has nourished a substantive populism, which started well before Brexit. From a polity perspective, the withdrawal of the UK has a considerable impact on **Northern Ireland** (NI). In their article Colfer and Diamond show that Europeanization before Brexit had a strong impact polity-wise as it provided ‘a constructive context for societal normalisation’ and a ‘shared political space that helped transcend binary political, religious and ethnic differences’ in NI. The EU also played an important role in ‘promoting power-sharing and post-nationalist politics’. Colfer and Diamond show nonetheless that the way the Johnson government deals with NI is a case of de-Europeanization which could eventually lead to ‘disintegration’.

From a **policy** perspective, Jancic shows that the so-called ‘Brussels’ effect’ on regulatory standards is so high that it is likely that the UK Parliament’s legislative and regulatory choices remain deeply influenced by the EU. Indeed, in the past even the most Eurosceptic select committees across both Houses of Parliament have advocated for a close alignment with EU regulatory standards in export-intensive economic sectors such as automotive, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and financial services. In a way the choices made by the British policy-makers is a form of re-engagement with some arguments that in order to achieve Global Britain there ought to be a re-engagement with the regulatory requirements of the EU. According to Jancic, although there has been some disengagement in the political rhetoric, the practice of regulatory standards policy-making points to the inescapability of re-engaging with the normative gravity of the EU. In the case of cultural policy, the **British Council** on the other hand has voluntarily undertaken a process of re-engagement in EU-UK Relations. Fearing from its reputation to be damaged by Brexit, the institution has developed new narratives on its independence from the government and thus on the very limited impact the UK’s withdrawal from the EU will have on its own activities. Furthermore, the British Council has been capitalizing on Brexit to strengthen its soft power, its bilateral ties and initiate new partnerships with EU member States, as argued by Riotte. Cultural policy is therefore a key case study on how bottom-up Europeanization can still take place in a post-Brexit era.

Finally, Wolff, Piquet and Farrand-Carrapico analyse the impact of Brexit on the engagement of British policy-makers and law enforcement officials in the so-called area of ‘**Justice and Home Affairs**’. In contrast with migratory policies, continued engagement is observable in police cooperation matters. For instance, the EU acquis on Prüm has been downloaded and complies with EU norms so it could keep exchanging fingerprints and genetic data with its EU partners. Similarly, in cybersecurity where many soft law tools exist through dialogue or consultation, there are instances, including at bilateral and global levels, where the
withdrawal from the EU seems to have a limited impact as the UK maintains an identical participation. Moreover, despite leaving key agencies and the UK is not automatically seeking to distance itself from the EU’s activities and approaches to the policy field of police and judicial cooperation. Wolff, Piquet and Farrand Carrapico show that the UK has managed to keep some access and participation to EU mechanisms such as the conclusion of an operational agreement with Europol, the setting up of a special EU-UK committee on these matters, and the adoption of an EU-UK surrender agreement. This re-engagement is nonetheless halted by Europeans who have proved reluctant to any close cooperation in the field of JHA in the absence of mutual trust in the rest of the Brexit negotiations.

Conclusions

Far from understanding Brexit as the end of a process and a critical juncture, the contribution of this special issue is to highlight the various post-Brexit pathways. Engaging with the literature on de-Europeanization and dismantlement we have shown that there are more options to full dismantlement and de-Europeanization. The future of trajectories, from a polity, public policy, and politics perspective, is one that can be thought through also around the concepts of disengagement, re-engagement, and continued engagement.

This special issue argues that the post-Brexit UK’s pathways of polity, politics, and policy will be multiple and varied. Preliminary findings across the various case studies in public policy, but also touching upon politics and polity, show that although the pre-existing degree of Europeanization may matter, prior existing alignment, historical legacies, and the role of the EU in the negotiations have all (and will continue to) influence different trajectories.

We also identify a gap between rhetoric and practice at several levels. For instance, while the discourse of regulatory policy-makers is that of disengagement, as well as for the settled status, there are in fact forms of re-engagement that have appeared in practice. This adds to the complexity and diversity of future trajectories post-Brexit.

Finally, we advocate for a conceptualization of Brexit as a process and not as a circumscribed event. This is because we contend that in the future, the direction of public policies may be affected by the future domestic politics of the UK. For instance, the pro-European marches in the streets of British cities could have a legacy in the long term, offering a different trajectory to those in British society who are still open to some European influence.

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