Notes on Global Britain and xenophobic nationalism
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Abstract: La Brexit è sicuramente l'evento più drammatico nella storia dell'integrazione europea così come nella politica contemporanea dell'Unione Europea. Questo articolo evidenzia alcuni dei suoi aspetti più importanti. In primo luogo, suggerisce come parte della retorica dei Conservatori su questa "necessaria uscita" dall'Unione Europea fosse basata sul mito secondo cui il paese è una forza globale – la Gran Bretagna globale – con un passato globale (imperiale) così come con ambizioni globali. La conseguenza naturale era quella di lasciare l'UE. In secondo luogo, la Brexit nascondeva inequivocabilmente una forma di nazionalismo xenofobo che favoriva la narrazione populista e il conseguente voto euroscettico. Inoltre, come mostra l'articolo, l'establishment politico tradizionale ha reso popolare la xenofobia antieuropea ben prima del referendum sulla Brexit.

Parole chiave: Brexit, xenofobia, nazionalismo, euroscetticismo

Abstract: Brexit is surely the most dramatic event in the history of European integration as well as in contemporary European Union politics. This article highlights some of its most important aspects. Firstly, it suggests how some of the Conservatives' rhetoric on this "necessary exit" from the European Union was based on the myth that the country is a global force – Global Britain – with a global (imperial) past as well as global ambitions. Given this, the natural consequence was to leave the EU. Secondly, Brexit unambiguously concealed a form of xenophobic nationalism which favoured the populist narrative and the subsequent Eurosceptic vote. Moreover, as the article shows, the mainstream political establishment popularised anti-European xenophobia well before the Brexit referendum.

Keywords: Brexit, xenophobia, nationalism, Euroscepticism

As the editors of a special issue of the «British journal of politics and international relations» rightly put it, «The choice made by voters in the United Kingdom on 23 June 2016 to leave the European Union (EU) caused a political earthquake in more ways than one»[1]. This socio-economic and political upheaval is far from ended. There are ongoing repercussions. In early 2024, for example, Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, stated how Brexit is dragging down the economy of the capital city. Leaving the Eu essentially meant 290,000 fewer jobs in the city. In sum, Brexit costed London's economy £30bn.

It surely represents the most dramatic event in the history of European integration. Brexit symbolises a watershed in contemporary history as well as in European Union politics. In particular, even if some of its national media hardly admit so, Great Britain was politically one of the most problematic European nations. It was clearly characterised by a troubled relationship with the supranational institutions based in continental Europe.

It is true that debates on the European community started with its actual building by the founding members in the 1950s and became naturally more relevant in the 1970s when the country joined and confirmed the membership with a referendum. Yet, the *distance* from the continent has been quickly growing at least since 2009. The push coming from the anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP), led, at the time, by «The Times'» «Briton of the Year» Nigel Farage made Calais seem imperceptible from Dover. However, the Conservative Party also contributed to such unexpected outcome.

Many factors featured in this peculiar British Euroscepticism, including the following:

(1) the growing regional and geographical differentiation of political cultures in a more dis-United Kingdom; (2) the increasing presence of non-majoritarian electoral systems in the UK polity and the ability to carry success from one electoral system to another; (3) the declining electoral appeal of valence politics; (4) declining partisan alignment and identification; (5) increasing electoral volatility; the 'taint of office'; (6) the declining electoral appeal of valence politics; (7) growing divisions within the Conservative Party over Europe; (8) the increasing use of referendums to resolve positional issues; (9) growing anxieties about immigration and competition for jobs associated (rightly or wrongly) with Eu enlargement and the free mobility of labour; and (10) growing economic inequality in a context of austerity and persistently low growth. If Brexit can be seen as a (potentially) seismic shift, then these are the fault-lines making it possible[2].

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[1] D. Wincott, J. Peterson and A. Convery, *Introduction: Studying Brexit's causes and consequences*, in «The British journal of politics and international relations», XVIII (2017), p. 430.
[2] C. Hay, *Brexistential Angst and the Paradoxes of Populism: On the Contingency, Predictability and Intelligibility of Seismic Shifts*, in «Political Studies», LXVII (2020), pp. 187-206.

People were struggling with the harsher outcomes of ultra-liberal capitalism and the economic inequalities and were paying the *austerity price.* Common citizens were excluded from the economic growth or from London's housing (investment) boom. The austerity model in British living standards in 2014 the country saw an increase in both millionaires and people below the poverty line. This translated into a troubling popularity of Conservatives which attempted to present themselves as the «party of the nation» – being, at the same time, centre, right and left. The reality is that they were simply trying to exploit the difficulties of the other parties, while shaping their strategies accordingly. This included wooing the anti-system or protest votes which were characterizing elections in the Western globe.

In this sense, we are by no means facing here a uniquely British phenomenon. It has already been suggested how the vote for Brexit

is not an isolated event, but part of a wave of populist, anti-elite revolts: a new 'anti-system' politics Western democracies are experiencing, shaking the existing consensus around economic integration, free markets and liberal values. This wave takes a variety of forms, but has in common a robust, even violent, rejection of the mainstream political elites and their values, and a demand for governments to act on the sources of social and economic distress and inequality. Brexit [is] part of this new anti-system politics, a reaction to the decline in ideological competition in democracies and the increasing impotence of politicians to address the upheavals wrought by global free market capitalism. This reaction has become particularly acute after the financial crisis of the late 2000s, which affected Britain disproportionately, and the failure of austerity policies to revive growth, crystallising the ineffectiveness of existing policies to deal with economic stagnation and cultural change[3].

Yet, economy is not telling us everything. Historical lenses may also be useful for a better understanding of social or political phenomena. Brexit specifically saw the rise of a number of historical myths and specific narratives on national history. In this sense, Great Britain was really "exceptional". «Most countries see themselves as exceptional, but few have ever allowed the belief in their exceptionalism to damage their economic and political interests in quite the way Britain is currently doing», wrote economist Simon Tilford in May 2017, at the time deputy director at the London-based think tank Centre for European Reform. «What makes so many British politicians, business leaders and newspaper editors so confident that Britain will flourish unencumbered by the Eu?», he added. One answer that many, including himself, gave was because of a mixture of narrow readings of one's own national history and of what constitutes the core of Britishness, along with the belief in being a global nation

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[3] J. Hopkin, *When Polanyi met Farage: Market fundamentalism, economic nationalism, and Britain's exit from the European Union*, in «The British journal of politics and international relations», XVIIII (2017), p. 466.

– namely "Global Britain" – with a global (imperial) past as well as global ambitions.

The myth of a special path taken by Britain's history as well as the singularity of insular cultures was supported not only by decades of Eurosceptic propaganda in the popular press but also, intellectually, by some cultural elites as well as mainstream politicians. Given this, the natural consequence was to leave the European Union. However, my article challenges this political narrative. Aside from the various reasons for voting Brexit, I especially see it as a form of a resurgent xenophobic nationalism. Brexit is, in various ways, similar to, and eventually tied with, nationalist stances developed elsewhere in the European continent. It might be better understood in a wider populist frame including Bolsonaro and Trump, but also the nationalist and Eurosceptic governments of Poland and Hungary.

Nationalism plays another powerful role in Britain's historically heated relationship with the postwar European community. This turned into open xenophobia before and during the 2016 referendum. this xenophobia was the outcome of aggressive Eurosceptic propaganda, but also a clear manifestation of social fears. Setting aside the exceptionalist mantra, which is behind Global Britain, Brexit can consequently be studied also as a xenophobic phenomenon. In other words, if there is eventually something unique in the contemporary rhetoric of Brexiters' Euroscepticism is the narrative of exceptionalism which includes the global imaginaries. We might otherwise consider the "exit" from the Eu through the lenses of a right-wing anti-Eu nationalism.

A global, imperial, Britain

Some months after the Brexit vote, the former Remainer Theresa May, then Conservative Prime Minister, suggested how «The British people voted to leave the European Union and embrace the world». In particular, she explained how the vote in the referendum of June 2016, «was not the moment Britain chose to step back from the world. It was the moment we chose to build a truly Global Britain»⁴. This idea of greatness mostly relates to the political-economic sphere and is based on a belief that the country enjoys some perennial extraordinary international strength and reputation. In this context, Britain's diminishing influence on the international scale was perceived as related to the Eu membership.

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⁴ T. May, *The government's negotiating objectives for exiting the Eu: PM speech*, «Prime Minister's Office», February 2017. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-governments-negotiating-objectives-for-exiting-the-eu-pm-speech

Its role, as suggested, had or could be only a global one. in this sense, the European membership was considered by some politicians as a betrayal of the global aspirations of the country and also of its ruling role in the Commonwealth. Reconnecting with this tradition was legitimised by "history". It meant pushing the country in its natural global (historical) dimension – one which was far away from the European bloc[5]. This rhetoric has been influencing the Eu referendum and the Brexiters' post-2016 policies. The idea was that Britain could reach its real potential in many sectors only outside of the Eu.

This was not completely new. As highlighted by Ben Wellings, English (populist) nationalism in the modern era is essentially framed by a clear opposition and resistance to European integration. This started just before the accession to the European Economic Community (Eec) in the 1970s. It essentially merges the defence of Parliamentary sovereignty, the belief in the uniqueness of Britain's parliament, some issues of popular sovereignty with some other myths on the British past[6]. What is then really specific the ideology behind Brexit is the idea of a "superiority" or "prominence" of England – or, better, of a specific English nationalism – along with its peculiar traditions and practices which are specific to its own shores.

However, it is since 2010 that Tories' manifestos suggest how power may eventually go back to Westminster. The same happened after Brexit when Prime Minister Theresa May surprisingly called a snap election in 2017 with the confidence of an overwhelming winning to counter the Eu negotiators. While citizens were highly preoccupied with austerity and the unclear consequences of Brexit, May granted a nationalist, and anti-Eu electoral manifesto.

This was, nonetheless, a rhetoric informing national policies too. For example, the ending of the membership of the Erasmus programme was adopted even if the House of Lords' European Union Committee suggested in 2019 how this change was excessively affecting the cultural and professional growth of students from less affluent backgrounds[7]. Yet, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that they were substituting it with a new, *global*, scheme – where students «have the opportunity not just to go to European universities, but to go to the best universities in the world»[8].

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[5] *Ibidem*.

[6] B. Wellings, *Losing the peace: Euroscepticism and the foundations of contemporary English nationalism*, in «Nations and Nationalism», XVI (2010), pp. 488-505.

[7] European Union Committee 28th Report of Session 2017–19, *Brexit: the Erasmus and Horizon programmes*, in «HL Paper 283», House of Lords, 2019.

[8] B. Maguire, *Boris Johnson: Turing scheme to replace Erasmus will give students pick of the world*, in «The Times», 31 December 2020. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/boris-johnson-turing-scheme-to-replace-erasmus-will-give-students-pick-of-the-world-gsnkxf0sf

In such a vein, Eurosceptics were stating how Brexit Britain can become a sustainable fishing superpower and «Consumers of fish can only benefit if a more global Britain demonstrates leadership in UK waters and the oceans of the world».[9] Many British politicians borrowed this rhetoric of greatness. The Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, for example, before a meeting at the United Nations' annual General Assembly in 2019 wrote,

As we make progress in our Brexit negotiations, we are also taking our vision of a truly Global Britain to the UN – leading by example as a force for good in the world […]. We want to be good European neighbours and buccaneering global free traders. But Global Britain is about more than Brexit or even free trade, important though they are. Under Boris Johnson, we intend to reinforce Britain's role in the world as a good global citizen – and the UN is a great place to start […]. When we leave the EU, there will be enormous opportunities across the world. Britain will be a force for good[10].

The country was, in sum, going to unleash its strength only if free from the reins imposed by the European supranational institutions. Only in doing so, the country could regain its international status. This idea was more or less in line with May's first outline of what this global perspective meant (even if it was never properly articulated). At the Conservative Party conference in 2016, she stated the ambitious vision for this new Global Britain,

A Britain in which we pass our own laws and govern ourselves. In which we look beyond our continent and to the opportunities in the wider world […]. In which we play our full part in promoting peace and prosperity around the world […]. Brexit should not just prompt us to think about our new relationship with the European Union. It should make us think about our role in the wider world. It should make us think of Global Britain, a country with the self-confidence and the freedom to look beyond the continent of Europe and to the economic and diplomatic opportunities of the wider world. Because we know that the referendum was not a vote to turn in ourselves, to cut ourselves off from the world. It was a vote for Britain to stand tall, to believe in ourselves, to forge an ambitious and optimistic new role in the world. A truly Global Britain is possible, and it is in sight. And it should be no surprise that it is. Because we are the fifth biggest economy in the world. Since 2010 we have grown faster than any economy in the G7. And we attract a fifth of all foreign investment in the EU. We are the biggest foreign investor in the United States. We have more Nobel Laureates than any country outside America. We have the best intelligence services in the world, a military that can project its power around the globe, and friendships, partnerships and alliances in every continent. We have the greatest soft power in the

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[9] C. Clover, *The happy fate of North Sea cod shows Brexit Britain can become a sustainable fishing superpower*, in «The Telegraph», 5 July 2017. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/05/happy-fate-north-sea-cod-shows-brexit-britain-can-become-sustainable/

[10] *Global Britain is leading the world as a force for good: article by Dominic Raab*, in «Foreign & Commonwealth Office», 22 September 2019. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/global-britain-is-leading-the-world-as-a-force-for-good-article-by-dominic-raab

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world, we sit in exactly the right time zone for global trade, and our language is the language of the world[11].

These arguments were reinstated in the 2017 electoral manifesto where the party granted a nationalist and anti-Eu program. Its preamble repeated the word "Brexit" five times in just seven lines (in general, "Brexit" is recurrent countless times in any official or political statement). The document was, once more, based on an idea of greatness, or even superiority. It talks to the ego of such (lost) imperial grandeur which, as mentioned before, is crossing some sectors of the English society. It was, in fact, appealing to the nostalgic isolationists as well as the voters supporting Brexit. It then understandably portrays the Uk as a «great nation», also a «global» one, with a «glorious [and, again, global] history», «the global capital of finance and culture», «the language of the world», a «significant influence for good around the world», «the greatest soft power of any nation», and, finally, with a «leadership in the world to defend and advance the interests of the British people, and to extend around the world those values that we believe to be right». Given this, Britain's «future must be global too»[12].

The perceptions of being a «great nation» or a «force for good» in the globe is also telling us something very peculiar on English culture. In many ways, they reveal specific issues in public memory and with historical exceptionalism. The «illusions of British [global] power and prestige» have wider implications and go further in popular imaginaries»[13]. However, this belief in a superiority was sometimes also influenced by manifest xenophobia. The latter became one of the main practical as well as noticeable Brexit's features.

Anti-European xenophobia

Some forms of xenophobia were shaping public opinion well before Brexit. Much of the political discussion opposing the Eu membership was framed around the theme of immigration. The politicisation of Eu citizens was carried over the years especially by the Ukip and the Conservative Party. Governments were unable to reduce the number of migrants and the Eu regulations were protecting Europeans. In particular, the problem was that Eu citizens may work in another Eu country without needing a permit but also have to enjoy equal access to social benefits and tax advantages. Both the Eu and Europeans in Britain were

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[11] *Theresa May - her full Brexit speech to Conservative conference*, in «The Independent», 2 October 2016. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-conference-speech-article-50-brexit-eu-a7341926.html

[12] *Forward*, in «The Conservative Unionist Party Manifesto», 2017.

[13] B. Martill, *Britain has lost a role, and failed to find an empire*, in «UCL Europe Blog», 2017. https://ucleuropeblog.com/2017/01/18/britain-has-lost-a-role-and-failed-to-find-an-empire/

portrayed as excessive burdens for the country. In 2014, for example, minister for work and pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, a former conservative leader, while travelling in Germany for a conference, clarified how some existing EU rules had to be modified. He mentioned how «the EU uses freedom of movement as a pretext to interfere and tell us whom to pay benefits, regardless of their circumstances». The attack on the EU was evident, even if there was no evidence to prove his argument, «We don't have data on the claimants, but there are anecdotal stories on how communities have to deal with it, how it puts pressure on schooling, housing»[14]. Such a populist message had to be strong enough to hit the public and Tory's former voters who were shifting to Farage's party. Given this, Duncan Smith, also went further:

On a large scale [EU immigration] can cause unrest - civil unrest. It can also cause problems with regard to employment and it can lead to tensions […]. We should leave it to countries to resolve some of these matters themselves, and have general limitations, so you could fix the number of people you want to come in[15].

Let similarly consider some of the major themes used over the referendum, including the promises of increased funding for the National Health Service (NHS). An example was the Vote Leave bus promoting the claim that Brexit was bringing £350 million back to spend on the health service. Moreover, as Vote Leave suggested, «If we remain in the EU, the NHS will be put under more and more pressure» (because of EU citizens). Another classic trope used by pro-Brexit politicians and pundits during the referendum was the necessity to control EU immigration and consequently protect national citizens from fallen wages because of migrants' competition – «British workers are hit hard by unlimited cheap labour», was the message of a UKIP poster –, and, more generally, as a leaflet by the Better Off Out put it, to stop the «rise in foreign born employment».

This was hardly a new language – even for Britain. In the early 2000s, electoral propaganda and bulletins from the neo-fascist British National Party (BNP) similarly claimed how the membership of the European Union and the political ties with other member states were wasting public funding which could be used for the restoration of an efficient health service. The party was equally ready to protect the British people and business from foreign labour force. The withdrawal from the EU would have correspondingly restored «Britain

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[14] 2014 data shows instead how in Germany only 11.6% of Bulgarians and Romanians claimed benefits, a lower figure compared to other non-German citizens (which was on average 16%). V. Pop, *UK calls for welfare restrictions after Eu election*, in «Euobserver» 4 June 2014. https://euobserver.com/social/124463

[15] T. Ross, *Iain Duncan Smith: cut migration or Britain could quit Eu*, in «The Telegraph», 4 October 2014. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/eureferendum/11141331/Iain-Duncan-Smith-cut-migration-or-Britain-could-quit-Eu.html

freedom». Migration, in fact, became an issue at least since 2001. Debates were radicalised by the BNP (up to 2009) and then the UKIP (from 2009 onwards).

Unemployment and the electoral growth of Euroscepticism in the EU elections of May 2014 contributed to an extra turmoil, with some politicians proposing the repatriation of EU immigrants. It is worth nothing how the electoral growth of these far-right parties pushed mainstream groups towards the right on themes such as identity, belonging, and citizenship. Similar trends can be observed in continental Europe – including Austria or France among others. France's president between 2007 and 2012, Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, promoted strict immigration policies, established a ministry for immigration and national identity, expelling more than 9,000 Roma people, and probably exacerbating discrimination against many Frenchmen with immigrant origins.

In Britain, targets were both EU and non-EU migrants. This was because of the pressure from the mentioned English anti-EU nationalism as well as the large influx of EU citizens. Conservatives played a major role in the mainstreaming of xenophobic stances towards "foreigners". The party promoted the idea of a benefit/health tourism enjoyed by EU people.

The ruling of the European Court of Justice in November 2014 on a Romanian woman and her son who were denied benefits in Germany seemed, in fact, a victory for many of these pro-nationalistic stances. Nations may refuse some benefits to unemployed EU migrants attempting to exploit welfare provisions. British newspapers such as the «Daily Express» immediately proclaimed, «At last a benefits ban: Jobless EU migrants will NOT be allowed to milk our welfare system». Cameron added how this ruling stopping benefit tourism was common sense[16].

The message to frightened British voters was clear: EU migrants were exploiting Britain's resources, and this had to be stopped. This led to further xenophobic propaganda mixed with demagogic messages. For example, a letter to Prime Minister David Cameron signed by the Tory activists' group Conservative Grassroots called for an extension of the restrictions on Bulgarians and Romanians moving to Great Britain for job reasons after 2013. The UKIP was already pushing strong on this specific issue and exploited it both in the following 2014 local and EU elections. The local manifesto was (unsurprisingly) entitled: «Open-door immigration is crippling local services in the UK». Farage, the then leader, exaggerated the immigration threat from Bulgaria and Romania: «Up to 29 million more people are, therefore, entitled to come here, to take advantage of our benefits, social housing, primary school places and free health

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[16] M. Hall, *At last a benefits BAN: Jobless Eu migrants will NOT be allowed to milk our welfare system*, in «Daily Express», 12 November 2014. https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/534343/Eu-migrants-ban-on-milking-welfare-system

care», but apparently having financially contributed nothing to the public welfare. Interestingly, he also claimed how this had to be a genuine anti-EU vote in light of a future Brexit: «I urge you to use the local and European elections as […] a 'pre-referendum' on EU membership»[17].

From this moment up to the referendum in June 2016, Britain's political agenda became essentially dictated by Farage's party. An editorial by «The Independent» strongly criticised such a move, envisioning possible negative outcomes in the general mood towards the EU: «It is a bad day when the Prime Minister has his agenda dictated by UKIP […]. This could set us on the road to road to road to disaster, with the British public voting to sever ties with Europe and put up a sign saying that foreigners are not welcome here»[18].

Cameron was attempting to implement stricter immigration policies (also in light of the negotiation on Britain's partnership with the EU). In an article for «The Telegraph» on 28 July 2014, he made his new approach clear: «Our goal is an immigration system that puts Britain first». He explained that in order to protect «the British public interest», his government was ready to challenge the European Convention on Human Rights on migrant family reunion, to ban overseas-only recruitment for British firms, and reduce welfare benefits[19].

A few months later, even Labour leader, Ed Miliband, probably scared of the coming general election, started following (though with a softer tone) some of this Eurosceptic anti-immigrant rhetoric. He claimed that Britain needed stronger control over people moving from the European continent. This was a tremendous shift from the pro-EU migration of the Blair era, as it also meant reforming one of the pillars of European integration, namely the EU citizens' freedom of movement[20]. The traditional political establishment had hardly calculated the risk of instilling anti-European stances in the British public opinion. An electoral (and ideological for some) reasoning prevailed over reality and facts.

2014 data on welfare costs for EU citizens living in Britain did not support these rather alarmistic claims. As a 94-pages Home Office report leaked to the «BBC» suggested, EU migrants were having positive effects and were using welfare benefits less than British citizens. In sectors such as agriculture, it said how migration «has alleviated skills shortages and provided a welcome source

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[17] N. Farage, *Vote UKIP – Get UKIP," in UKIP, Open-door immigration is crippling local services in the UK,* in «Manifesto 2014», 2014, p. 2.

[18] Editorials, *Not so tough,* in «The Independent», 29 November 2014, p. 2.

[19] D. Cameron, *We're are building an immigration system that puts Britain first*, in «The Telegraph», 28 June 2014. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/10995875/David-Cameron-Were-building-an-immigration-system-that-puts-Britain-first.html

[20] A. Grice, *Immigration, immigration, immigration*, in «The Independent», 24 October 2014, p. 1.

of energetic and motivated workers eager to undertake work that is not being filled by the resident labour force». The report was ready in December 2013, but publication was postponed because it was not fitting in the Eurosceptic propaganda of the conservative elites – especially before the European elections in of May 2014. In sum, «Tory ministers believed it was too pro-European»[21].

This xenophobic approach became popular and influenced public opinion until the Brexit vote. The same May, nominally a pro-EU conservative, was constantly advocating for a stricter approach to immigration. She was the Home Office secretary in Cameron's government (2012) when she set up the famous "hostile environment" for illegal immigration. In October 2015, she suggested that the large number of migrants was undermining the social cohesion of the country. Once more, mainstream politicians were negatively portraying immigration or minimising migrants, positive contribution to Britain – up to the point that «The Independent» ironically titled «So what have immigrants ever done for us, Theresa?». Boris Johnson, later foreign secretary, instead co-authored with Gove a letter in May 2016 that criticised Cameron for failing to decrease EU immigration, a fault he claimed was corrosive of public trust in politics. Some time later, Prime Minister May promised again to bring net migration below 100,000 per year after the coming election[22].

Conclusion: on a nationalist Europe

These statements from high-ranking politicians show how nationalism and the relevance of nation-states are growing significantly and gaining a consensus in public debates often dominated by right-wing themes. Isolationism is a legitimate policy for some of the British conservatives and all the anti-EU movements elsewhere. To them, their countries' wealth must be protected for their own population. This policy of exclusion nonetheless provides demagogic answers to some of the concerns of national citizens. We are all aware of how (de)colonisation and globalisation contributed to changing Western communities as well as reframing the balance between national and global powers (while prompting an ongoing deterioration of nation-states) with an influence on some strata of European societies, and particularly the white working class. The economic downturn further raised the fears of the population.

Conservatives were simply exploiting popular opinion and giving voices to the narrow-minded nationalists most active in their parties. Naturally, in the

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[21] N. Hopkins, *Immigration report too 'pro-European'*, in «BBC», 18 July 2014. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-28368567

[22] H. Mance, *May to renew Tories' broken promises on immigration*, in «Financial Times», 7 May 2017, p. 1.

British context, the rise of U<small>KIP</small> and the Eurosceptic propaganda of some press outlets reinforce a Eurosceptic vision of national life and U<small>K</small>-centric international policy.

This should also help us to reconsider the boundaries between the far right and some of the "moderate" anti-E<small>U</small> right. Euroscepticism and anti-immigrant policies are the blurring lines between conservative forces and extremist ones. It is not a case that Britain's Conservative M<small>PEs</small> did not vote for the activation of the sanctioning (article 7) against the illiberal nationalist turn of Orban's government. They were also in the same European parliamentary group with the far-right Swedish Democrats and the Danish People's Party as well as the ultra-nationalist and ultra-Catholic Polish Law and Justice. What is worth reflecting upon is that movements are successful in radicalizing political debates. This has to be then contextualised in a wider nationalist frame which is challenging democracy in Europe.

On the European scale, these parties find a common policy on the idea of protecting national sovereignty. This idea naturally goes along with a trend combining the fear of the "other" with a rejection of cultural diversity as well as Euroscepticism with opposition to refugee-friendly approaches. There is an equal tendency to reject liberals and their cosmopolitanism. The belief is to reembrace the nation state, national pride, historical myths, and narrow patriotism. The language of nationalism ("Our nation first") is consequently shared by politicians such as Orban and Trump, Salvini and Farage.

These right-wing parties have, for years, been influencing mainstream policies regarding immigration and discussions on citizenship and identity. Yet, the belief in an immigration threat did not appear out of nowhere, nor was it popularised exclusively by the far right. Conservatives in some European nations already went even further in promoting (anti-)immigration on the political agenda because of the fear of the uncontrolled migration from the former colonies in the 1950s-1970s. There were or are still echoes of this rhetoric in centre-right governments in E<small>U</small> countries such as Austria, Italy, France, Hungary and Poland.

It also reminds us how this is linked with other events happening in the history of Europe. Historically, it reflects, in some ways, also when some Western governments of the early 1900s fretted about immigration — by which they meant Eastern European Jews — and of scapegoating of Slavs, Roma, the Jewish community, and migrants from the Third World. In 1903, for example, a royal commission report on the so-called "alien immigrants" in the U<small>K</small> discussed Central and Eastern European immigration, and similarly used words like lack of jobs and housing to try to ban it.

In this sense, if global imaginaries mixed with exceptionalism – in sum, Global Britain – can be an exclusive feature of Brexit, the anti-immigrant dimension is not unique. However, it represented a major problematic aspect which was popularised well before the referendum. It was a relevant symptom of the fragility of the current phase of European history. The materialisation of a certain disdain towards democracy and multiculturalism is taking many different shapes: From the ultra-nationalist drift of Hungary to antisemitism in Poland, and from the growing popularity of anti-immigrant far-right parties such as the French National Rally to Brexit's Euroscepticism as well as xenophobic nationalism.