

**MASARYKOVA  
UNIVERZITA**

FACULTY OF SOCIAL STUDIES

**Brexit Means Brexit Means  
What?  
Discursive Constructions of  
Brexit in the United Kingdom**

Habilitation Thesis

(A collection of previously published scholarly works with commentary)

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Brno 2021

## **Abstract**

This habilitation thesis engages in the timely and vibrant issue of the discursive construction(s) of Brexit – and, by association, the relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) – in the British political context. Taking a discursive analytical perspective, its overarching aim is to provide an insight into how different actors have made sense of Brexit as a key topic in modern British politics and legitimised, through language, their perspectives thereof. The thesis comprises five original studies, all of them single-authored, that have provided a number of novel insights into the research on the articulation of the Brexit discourse in the UK. The thesis shows how functionally different British political actors have legitimised their interpretations, visions and conceptions of Brexit, and the associated policy choices they proposed (or did not propose), through different linguistic and discursive devices as well as various combinations thereof. As evidenced in the course of thesis, the findings point to the discursive instrumentalization of Brexit for internal political purposes, with the actors strategically exploiting it to justify their approaches to both EU and domestic politics. What also emerges from the analysis presented in this thesis is the central role played by the self-othering in the discursive constructions of Brexit.

## **Key words**

Brexit, discourse, United Kingdom, European Union, discourse analysis, British politics

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my brilliant colleagues and dear friends at the Department of International Relations and European Studies, Masaryk University in Brno, who have provided me with relentless encouragement on multiple fronts, thoughtful advice and kind guidance. I am very privileged to be working with such inspiring, talented and caring people. Very warmest thanks go to my beloved family, my loving husband Jiří and our amazing children Teodor and Sofie, for the countless ways in which they have helped me, encouraged me and cheered me on. They are my heroes and I absolutely could not have done this without them. I am greatly thankful also to my parents Milan and Irena and my brother Milan who have always supported me with love, care and patience.

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

This habilitation thesis engages in the timely and vibrant issue of the discursive construction(s) of Brexit – and, by association, the relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) – in the British political context. Taking a discursive analytical perspective, its overarching aim is to provide an insight into how different actors have made sense of Brexit as “the most important and conversational topic in modern British politics” (Oliver 2018: 1), and legitimised, through language, their perspectives thereof. Its title alludes to the (in)famous and oft-repeated “Brexit Means Brexit” tautology by Theresa May, the 2016-2019 British Prime Minister who resigned in July 2019 due to the inability to gain parliamentary support for her Brexit proposals, to indicate the interpretative vagueness, relativity and ambiguity associated with this phenomenon.

In a nutshell, the thesis shows how functionally different British political actors have legitimised their interpretations, visions and conceptions of Brexit, and the associated policy choices they proposed (or did not propose), through different linguistic and discursive devices as well as various combinations thereof. As evidenced in the course of thesis, the findings point to the discursive instrumentalization of Brexit for internal political purposes, with the actors strategically exploiting it to justify their approaches to both EU and domestic politics. What also emerges from the analysis presented in this thesis is the central role played by the self-othering in the discursive constructions of Brexit.

The introductory commentary proceeds as follow. First, to contextualize the thesis, I briefly examine the political-historical context of Brexit. Afterwards I illuminate the rationale behind studying the discourses of Brexit which is followed by the section elaborating on the logic guiding the composition of the thesis. The next part then discusses the basic theoretical premises of the thesis, while the subsequent one provides a short exposition and general reflection on the methodological underpinning of my research. Finally, the concluding section attends to the contributions to the academic literature that the research presented in the thesis has made.

### **Background: the context of Brexit**

2021 marks five years since the British voters decided in a referendum, by a slim majority, to leave the European Union. The United Kingdom’s (UK) engagement in the European integration process has always been somewhat problematic, ever since the country joined the

European Economic Community back in 1973. There is no other member state in which “the EU membership has been as controversial and emotionally charged amongst mainstream parties as in the UK” (Hertner and Keith, 2016: 2), with the country being long-term dubbed as a “awkward partner” and “reluctant European” (Diez, 2001: 7; George 1990: 1; Menon, 1998). The British referendum that took place on 23 June 2016 under the premiership of David Cameron is largely viewed as the culmination of this contested relationship. In 2013, Cameron made a commitment to renegotiate a better settlement for the UK’s membership in the EU and hold an in/out EU referendum, should the Conservative Party win the 2015 general election. Having won the elections, Cameron honoured his 2013 pledge and put the strategy of staging a renegotiation and organising the referendum into practice.

The shocking and unexpected decision of 51.9 % of the British electorate to vote in favour of leaving the EU has sent shockwaves around Europe and beyond (Glencross 2016; Sobolewska and Ford 2020; Usherwood 2018). In the wake of the referendum results, Cameron resigned and the succeeding government led by Theresa May was tasked with delivering Brexit, i.e. transforming the “will of the people” into a feasible withdrawal process. Having initiated the official withdrawal process on 29 March 2017 (which came to be known as Brexit) by invoking Article 50 of the Treaty of the EU, her intention was to lead a process that would culminate in a Withdrawal Agreement, negotiated with the European Union and approved by the British Parliament. Yet, even though the UK was originally due to leave the EU on 29 March 2019, the negotiation period was repeatedly extended, due to the inability of the British government to secure the backing of the British Parliament on the hard-fought Withdrawal deal (this is well-chronicled, for instance, in Figueira and Martill 2020 or McConnell and Torney 2020). Indeed, the whole period of the UK’s actual withdrawal became characterized by a “pathological combination of chaos, gridlock, constantly unravelling negotiations, serial failures to find a way forward, and intensely adversarial intra and inter-party divisions” (McConnell and Torney, 2020: 686).

It was especially Theresa May’s decision to unnecessarily call snap election 2017 in the (vain) hope to get a strong popular mandate for her vision of Brexit and secure the unproblematic passage of the Brexit legislation that seriously weakened her position. Instead of an increased majority, however, the Conservative Party lost the small majority it already enjoyed in the House Commons (against Jeremy Corbyn, an allegedly unelectable Leader of the Opposition) formed a minority government propped up by the Democratic Unionist Party (Gamble 2019: 177).

It was only under Boris Johnson, who succeeded Theresa May in July 2019, and after an extremely chaotic negotiation period that the UK officially withdrew from the EU on 31 January 2020. Boris Johnson thus became “the first Conservative leader to triumph over the Europe question, an issue that had undermined Margaret Thatcher, John Major, David Cameron and Theresa May” (Cutts, Goodwin, Heath and SurrIDGE 2020: 20). For 11 months, however, the country remained a member of the single market and customs union, while details of new arrangements with the EU were being negotiated. This transition period ended on 31 December 2020 and in late April 2021 the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union ratified the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement which governs the nature of the UK–EU post-Brexit trading relationship and which formally entered into force on 1 May 2021.

It is against this fascinating background that the thesis sets out to explore the discursive construction(s) of Brexit – and, by association, the relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) - in the United Kingdom.

### **The significance of studying discourses of Brexit**

The British withdrawal from the EU is “one of the most important and difficult political issues to define and analyse” (Oliver 2018: 1), not least due to its complexity and wide-ranging and unprecedented nature. The United Kingdom is the first, and so far the only, country to have left the European Union. Brexit is not a single process, or a single event. Rather, it is “a series of overlapping processes and debates taking place at and involving multiple actors in Britain, the remaining EU, the rest of Europe and around the world” (Oliver 2018: 1). What makes the discourses surrounding this phenomenon a compelling focus for academic attention? The significance of studying them is highlighted by a number of reasons, but perhaps five in particular.

Firstly, the British in/out referendum result has brought about one of the most chaotic, turbulent and challenging periods in the UK’s modern political history (Dunlop, James and Radaelli, 2020; Figueira and Martill 2020; Gamble 2019) and started a period of “profound and difficult change that may result in a fundamental remaking of the United Kingdom, and perhaps even its dissolution” (Ashcroft and Bevir 2016: 365). As a “mega-policy”, to borrow the words from Richardson and Rittberger (2020: 652), Brexit has presented the Westminster establishment with “the greatest challenge of modern times” (McConnell and Tormey 2020: 685). It “confronts the UK with a series of questions and debates about its identity, society, political economy, trade, security, international position, constitution, legal system,

sovereignty, unity, party politics and the attitudes and values that define it” (Oliver 2018: 1). Thus, researching the discourses surrounding this “most significant moment of political choice and potential rupture since the Second World War, and in peacetime, possibly since the repeal of the Corn Laws in the nineteenth century” (Pearce and Kelly 2019: 1) significantly adds to the understanding of the nuances and distinctions of the UK’s troubled membership in the EU. Because, as Oliver (2018: 3) articulates very eloquently, Brexit is an “ideal topic through which to understand a changing UK [...] If you can understand Brexit, then you gain good grasp of the leading debates about the UK’s politics, economics, society, identity, culture, history, constitution, security and foreign policy”.

Secondly, Brexit is naturally not entirely about the UK as such. It is a critical juncture in the European integration process that marks a turning point in European politics and is widely acknowledged as one of the EU’s most serious crises with notable and unpredictable long-term impacts (this point is well-covered in Brown 2019; Caporaso 2018 or Nugent 2018). Perhaps most significantly, it has “triggered a novel process in European integration: differentiated disintegration, the selective reduction of a member state’s level and scope of integration” (Schimmelfennig 2018: 1154). Given its varied effects, studying the causes, consequences, causes and reinforcing dynamics of this unprecedented challenge is of crucial importance. In tandem with this, Brexit offers a unique opportunity to study how the EU is changing, because “How the EU responds to Brexit, how its internal balance of power change, what it means for the EU’s place within the Europe and wider world are big questions that will shape the future of the EU and the rest of Europe” (Oliver 2018: 5). Just as importantly, it has opened up questions about its contagion effects (in terms of both encouragement and deterrence effects) and the similarities and links between others EU member states and the UK, especially in a sense of the high level of Euroscepticism and the constraining dissensus (Oliver 2018: 212; Walter 2021). All this being said, Brexit is seen also as part of yet wider political trends across the world epitomized by the rising support for authoritarian politics, right-wing populism and benefits of phenomena such as globalisation (Oliver 2018: 212; Koller, Kopf and Miglbauer 2020).

Thirdly, the need for research in this area has been further highlighted by the period of immense uncertainty, characteristic of the post-referendum period, by the tremendous unpredictability that still looms around the impacts of Brexit in a host of areas, and by the enormous difficulties it has brought about. For better or worse, Brexit’s outcomes in a host of dimensions are still very hard to judge and/or predict. What is more, some aspects of the UK-EU relationship are yet to be negotiated, or renegotiated, and will unfold in many ways. At



times of crisis and uncertainty like these, keeping a critical eye on ways in which politicians and their discourses function and its underlying drivers is more important than ever.

Fourthly, with all these three factors coming together, Brexit is a fascinating case study for political science. It is intimately related to a wide range of issue areas, including party politics (not least in a sense of party discipline; relationship between parties and voters; positioning of the parties vis-à-vis the EU), parliamentary politics (scrutinising, and approving of, the Brexit process; executive-legislative relations), governmental politics (managing the administrative challenge stemming from Brexit; devising and implementing Brexit strategy; principle of collective responsibility), electoral politics (transforming the British party competition; challenging the traditional left-right dimension of party competition), constitutional arrangements (disputing the nature of devolved governance; role of devolved and local administrations in Brexit), political identities (managing cleavages leading to, and stemming from, the referendum) or the orientation of the country's foreign policy (debating the UK's global role in world politics; questions about its relationship with European countries, the United States and the broader world) (Bulmer and Quaglia 2018; Oliver 2017; Evans and Menon 2017). This essentially makes Brexit a compelling object of study.

Fifthly, I align myself with understanding of Brexit as having emerged “at the intersection of different path-dependent discursive trajectories” (Clarke and Newman 2017: 102 in Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019: 382) and encompassing “(re)articulation of social, political and cultural narratives’ along various logics” (Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019: 383). It therefore makes it a compelling research focus to uncover how these (re)articulations manifest themselves and what lies at their basis. As such, the general orientation of this habilitation thesis sits well with the ever-growing interest in discourse analytical approaches to politics as such (Cap and Okulska 2013; Kranert and Horan 2018; Lynggaard 2019). As much of the current scholarship reveals, these policymaking discourses play a key role in “determining the trajectory of policy change and, as such, should be treated as objects of enquiry in their own right” (Hay and Smith 2005: 135). Or in the words of Durnova and Zittoun (2013), “discursive approaches refuse to treat discourse as merely one explanatory variable among many others, considering it instead as the key to understanding how actors construct and modify public policies”. As such, Brexit enables us to study the role of discourse in politics, in political communication and also in the process of identity-formation and demonstrate how it impacts the political processes and interactions (and vice versa).

## Layout of the thesis

Until today, I have authored or co-authored many texts on Brexit. Compiling a habilitation thesis requires some selective choices, though, so I have chosen only a handful of papers for this collection - those which reflect my key research interest, i.e. the discursive practices of Brexit in the UK. In what follows, I will thus present my texts that shed light on the questions of the language and discursive features of Brexit from the British perspective.

The format of this habilitation thesis, i.e. a collection of previously published scholarly works with commentary is in compliance with Act No. 111/1998 Coll., that explicitly accepts this format in Article 5, point (1) b) of Masaryk University Directive No. 7/2017 on Habilitation Procedures and Professor Appointment Procedures. The thesis comprises five original studies, all of them single-authored, that have provided a number of novel insights into the research on the articulation of the Brexit discourse in the UK (for specific contributions to the existing scholarship, please, kindly see the section “Contribution to the scholarly literature” below). Three of these studies have been published in foreign academic journals with impact factor, one in a journal indexed in Scopus and one as a chapter in book published in Routledge. After this introductory part, the thesis proceeds with the following studies:

- Study I: Brusenbauch Meislová, Monika (2019) All things to all people? Discursive patterns on UK–EU relationship in David Cameron’s speeches. *British Politics* 14(3): 223-249.
- Study II: Brusenbauch Meislová, Monika (2021) The EU as a Choice: Populist and Technocratic Narratives of the EU in the Brexit Referendum Campaign. *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 17(2): 166-185.
- Study III: Brusenbauch Meislová, Monika (2019) Brexit Means Brexit—or Does It? The Legacy of Theresa May’s Discursive Treatment of Brexit. *Political Quarterly* 90(4): 681-689.
- Study IV: Brusenbauch Meislová, Monika (2021) Lost in the noise? Narrative (re)presentation of higher education and research during the Brexit process in the UK. *European Journal of English Studies* 25(1): 34-48.
- Study V: Brusenbauch Meislová, Monika (2021) Discursive Construction of Affective Polarization in Brexit Britain: Opinion-Based Identities and Out-Group Differentiation.

In: Marta Pérez Escolar and Jose Manuel Noguera Vivo (eds), *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Society*. London: Routledge, pp. 98-112.

Study I identifies, classifies and examines prevailing discourses used by the former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, in his speeches from 2010 to 2016, to construct the UK–EU bilateral relationship. Based on a detailed analysis of 60 official speeches, three distinct sub-discourses are identified: (1) integration; (2) differentiation and (3) reform. The article shows that Cameron’s discursive identities and rhetorical positions vis-à-vis the UK–EU relationship differed widely in their assessment of mutual ties/interactions and displayed profound incompatibilities. These largely competing discourses and rival imaginings on the UK–EU bilateral relationship help explain the high degree of ambivalence, paradox and misunderstanding associated with Cameron’s EU policy (Brusenbauch Meislová 2019).

Study II takes stock of the main populist and technocratic narratives employed in the campaign in the run-up to the 2016 British EU referendum. Based on a qualitative dataset comprising 40 selected speeches, interviews and other public interventions by prominent Leave and Remain protagonists and adopting the general orientation of the Discourse Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Analysis, the paper discusses how the language of the Remain and Leave camps bore signs of both populist and technocratic discourses. The key argument developed in this article is that while, at the most general level, the populist rhetoric was discursively appropriated by the Leave campaign (with the key narratives of the EU as a failure, EU as an oppressor and of anti-establishment fury) and the technocratic rhetoric by the Remain campaign (with the key narratives of the EU as a tool, the single market benefits and the withdrawal economic effects), the Remain side displayed a lower degree of narrative consistency (Brusenbauch Meislová 2021b).

Study III explores Theresa May’s post-referendum communicative behaviour on Brexit—the very issue that came to define her premiership agenda—and uncover what legacy it has left behind. Building upon, extending and updating the emerging literature on May’s discourse, the inquiry helps us understand how May acted through language in order to influence and change other people’s attitudes towards and ways of looking at Brexit. The article argues that there are at least seven ways, closely interrelated and feeding into each other, in which her discursive construction of Brexit has left a somewhat bitter legacy, contributing to the Brexit political paralysis and inspiring substantial levels of confusion and exasperation, both within the UK and abroad (Brusenbauch Meislová 2019b).

Study IV investigates how the considerations on higher education and research have been narratively represented in a public domain in the process of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. It actually serves as an apt illustration of how discursive practice in high politics (Brexit) impacts discursive policy-making in low politics (higher education). Having adopted the general orientation of the discourse historical approach to discourse analysis, the study surveys the narrative (re)presentation of research and higher education issues during three key phases of the Brexit process: 1) the pre-negotiation period; 2) the stage of Article 50 negotiation, and 3) the transition period. With the public domain restricted to higher education institutions (especially British universities) on the one hand, and the UK Government on the other, this inquiry helps us understand how the actors have employed specific narratives in order to create meaning and influence (and potentially change) the impact of Brexit on academia (Brusenbauch Meislová 2021a).

Study V provided an empirical illustration of the multi-faceted processes of collective identity formation and meaning-making in the context of Brexit. It deals with the pertinent question of how Leavers and Remainers, as opinion-based groups, communicate, share and exchange their perceptions, cognitions, and emotions in regard to out-groups. More specifically, it investigates which topics, discursive strategies and linguistic devices have been employed by British politicians to construct Leave and Remain identities in a sense of out-group antagonism(s) in contra-distinction to the given in-group. By looking at how Leavers and Remainers discursively cast the "other", the inquiry provides an empirical example of (a part of) collective identity formation and meaning-making in the process of Brexit, and adds to the literature on growing affective polarization along Brexit lines in the UK. Over the past couple of years, Brexit identity has become a very strong affective differentiator, with the polarization that it generates being rather intense in terms of stereotyping, emotional commitment, prejudice and various evaluative biases (Brusenbauch Meislová 2021c).

The final part of the thesis titled "Concluding Remarks" then synthesizes briefly the main results, teasing out some common themes, and outlines future research avenues.

At this point, a note on the formatting aspect of the thesis is necessary. The studies have been converted from the published versions in PDF format to Word format, while keeping the citation styles of the given journals.

## **Logic of the thesis set-up**

Without pretending to be exhaustive, this collection highlights some of the ways in which Brexit, and the UK-EU relationship as such, has been discursively cast in the United Kingdom. Even though the scope of the thesis is necessarily limited, I view it as an apt and empirically rich illustration of the sheer scale of Brexit's complexity. As intimated below, the logic guiding the composition of the thesis is three-fold.

### ***Time-based logic of the thesis***

The set-up of the studies follows the chronological order of the Brexit process and suitably covers the whole period of the withdrawal process. The first study touches upon the pre-referendum and referendum campaign discourse, examining David Cameron's speeches and reaching as far as 2010. I have decided to put this study first, as it was, essentially, David Cameron who, in 2013, under sustained pressure from his own backbenchers, made a commitment to hold an in/out referendum (Raitio and Raulus 2017; Richardson and Rittberger 2020). It is him who bears the responsibility "for initiating the referendum, for failing to manage expectations regarding the renegotiation, for agreeing a deal which failed to satisfactorily address key Eurosceptic concerns and, at least in part, for a lacklustre remain campaign" (Byrne, Randall and Theakson, 2017: 217). Study II focuses on the discourses foregrounded in the campaign, during the five-month period in the run-up to the referendum.

The rest of the studies homes in on the post-referendum discourses, offering a glimpse into the immediate to mid-term discursive effects associated with Brexit, because, as Oliver (2018: 6) effectively argues, a fuller understanding of Brexit "requires not only an examination of why the British people voted as they did, but also an analysis of the range of processes in the UK and elsewhere that have been set in train by the vote to leave". And post-referendum discursive articulations of Brexit certainly belong to this category. The third in line is thus the inquiry dealing with the discourse of Theresa May whose premiership was generally "immensely destabilising, but also potentially papered over party and government cracks" (Worthy and Bennister 2020). Study IV covers – inter alia – also the period after the UK has actually left the EU – the transition period. The final study also focuses on the post-referendum discourse, with the timespan of the data covering the period from late June 2016 until March 2019.

As such, the habilitation thesis covers all the key phases of the protracted Brexit process: 1) run-up to the referendum (from the time David Cameron entered 10 Downing Street as Prime Minister until the beginning of the referendum campaign in April 2016); 2) in/out referendum campaign (from the official launch of the campaign on 15 April 2016 until its end on 22 June 2016); 3) the pre-negotiation period (from the date of the announcement of the referendum result on 24 June 2016 until the day before the formal opening of the Article 50 negotiations on 18 June 2017); 4) Article 50 negotiations (from the formal opening of the negotiation on 19 June 2017 until the date of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on 31 January 2020), and 5) the transition period (from the beginning of the transition period on 1 February 2020 until its end on 31 December 2020).

### *Actor-based logic of the thesis*

The thesis is in essence actor-oriented, inspecting the topic from the perspective of a variety of different British political and other social actors. It shows how they have employed, through various processes of articulation, specific – and often conflictual – discourses in order to create meaning and influence (and potentially change) the impact of Brexit. The primary focus here is on the political-elite actors, especially on the prime ministerial discourses (Studies I and III), those of David Cameron and his successor, Theresa May, as it is essentially the Prime Minister who fundamentally shapes the content and direction of the British official discourse on the EU, “instigat[ing] and espous[ing] government policy towards European integration” (Daddow 2015: 72; further on this see, for instance, Allen and Oliver, 2006; Heffernan, 2005; O’Malley, 2007). Also, both these premierships, and confidence in them, were intimately associated with Brexit.

Simultaneously, the attention is being paid to the discourse at the lower level(s) of government (Studies II, IV and V), including prominent office-holders such as George Osborne (Chancellor of the Exchequer), Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Justice, Lord High Chancellor), Boris Johnson (Mayor of London, later Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister), Ian Duncan Smith (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions) or Dominic Raab (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Civil Liberties, later Minister of Foreign Affairs). Also, political figures outside of the government have come under scrutiny (Studies II and V), including Jeremy Corbyn (Leader of the Labour Party), Vince Cable (Leader of the Liberal Democrats), Natalie Bennett (Leader of the Green Party), Nigel Farage (Leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party), Nicola Sturgeon (First Minister of Scotland), Will Straw

(Executive director of Britain Stronger in Europe), Ruth Davidson (Leader of the Scottish Conservative Party), Gisela Stuart (Chair of the Vote Leave), as they also play decisive roles in establishing the standpoints towards Brexit and the UK-EU relationship as such. By explicating the particular problems (and, arguably, also opportunities) that these various British political actors have had coming to terms with Brexit, the thesis contributes to elucidating the intricate processes of the changing UK politics.

Meanwhile, in a bid to provide a more complex picture, heed is given to non-political actors, too – that is, to higher education institutions in a sense of the British universities (Study IV), as Brexit represents a fundamental shift in the academic landscape as well.

### *Genre-based logic of the thesis*

Regarding the genres, the data I have worked with mostly consists of the speeches and interviews of prominent politicians (Studies I, II, III and V and partly also Study IV). In substantive terms, the focus on speeches is substantiated by their policy-making potential (Charteris-Black, 2014: xiii). As highly performative texts, drawing on genre conventions (Fairclough, 2000), political speeches are a “coherent stream of spoken language that is prepared for delivery by a speaker to an audience for a purpose on a political occasion” (Charteris-Black, 2014: xiii). As such, they belong to a discursive genre strategically aimed at “influencing others, using rhetoric to persuade, excite, and claim leadership” (Klebanov et al. 2008: 448). In this context, Theresa May’s discourse is particularly interesting, as hers was a so-called rhetorical premiership, where “speech-making became a key guide to her often opaque plans, especially on Brexit” (Worthy and Bennister 2020). Apart from that, the thesis (especially Study IV) also works with public pronouncements, statements, official documents, and press releases by the UK government and British higher education institutions. Timewise, the thesis draws both on pre-referendum and post-referendum data on Brexit. Importantly, I have always worked on authentic data, and not translations, with the speeches and texts in their original versions.

At the same time, by providing tangible examples of multiple facets of Brexit, including populist and technocratic narratives employed in the referendum campaign, discursive construction of the “Other” by the Leavers and Remainers, narrative (re)presentation of higher education in the process or wider discursive representation of the UK-EU relationship as such, the thesis is appositely illustrative of the multi-dimensional nature of the withdrawal process.

## **Theoretical underpinnings of the thesis**

Theoretically, the habilitation thesis is built upon the social constructivist paradigm and its relation to discourse. Social constructivism accentuates the central role of language in creating social reality, considering it a primary means through which the social world is constructed (Gralewski 2011: 161; Mutigl 2002: 49). As Bennett (2018: 3) neatly sums up: “in order to understand problems within society, the questions of how societies speak (and indeed who speaks) about these problems publicly needs to be addressed”. The thesis aligns itself with the view of Schäffner (1996: 201) that any political action is “prepared, accompanied, controlled and influenced by language”. Likewise, Fairclough (2000: 157) acknowledges that “much of the action of government is language”, and also Chilton and Schäffner (1997: 206) recognise the key relationship between language and politics stating that: “It is surely the case that politics cannot be conducted without language, and it is probably the case that the use of language in the constitution of social groups leads to what we call ‘politics’ in a broad sense”.

Accordingly, the thesis starts from the governing assumption that Brexit – and member states’ approaches to the EU more broadly – is not derived solely from material factors, but is/are shaped by ideological factors, including intersubjective meanings, norms and discourses that involve knowledge, ideas, culture, ideology and language (Hopf 1998; Adler 1997). Constructivist approaches are therefore “crucial for an understanding of Member States’ European policy and the future development of European governance” (Diez 2001: 6) inasmuch that studying discourses helps us gain a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of member states’ European policy decisions. The complex demands of the communication situation faced by EU member states therefore provide “a fruitful laboratory for the study of the complexities, both internal and external, of political discourse” (Fløttum 2013: 1).

In this view, there is a dialectical relationship between certain discursive situations on the one hand, and the social structures in which they are embedded on the other. In other words, wider social and contexts affect and constitute discourses, whilst discourses simultaneously affect and constitute political and social reality (De Cilla, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999: 157). This understanding of discourse emphasizes the context, i.e. the relationship between the discursive event and the wider contexts in which it occurs, and that is why sufficient attention in individual studies presented in the habilitation thesis is always paid to the contextual factors, with the discourses of Brexit treated not as an isolated entity but always as part of a broader picture.

In summation, running through this habilitation thesis is thus the presupposition that talking about Brexit, and by association also the relationship between the UK and the EU, does



not only describe a given (or envisioned) reality; it also (co)-constructs it. Put differently, the actors' perceptions of Brexit and the UK–EU relationship does not only impact the political landscape on which the discussions over Britain's engagement with (and within) the EU are taking place, but has also real-life, direct implications for the practice of the British EU policy. Against this background, Brexit is understood here as “a site of contestation over the meanings of the issue at stake” and the actors who are involved in it “make their meaning of dominant discourses and translate it into the way they appropriate policy instruments and make sense of organisational processes” (Courtois and Veiga 2020: 813).

### **Methodological underpinnings of the thesis**

The habilitation thesis is located within the qualitative research tradition, belonging to the domain of constructivist and critical research and following the interpretive paradigm. It applies discourse analysis, which, in my view, supplies valuable tools for the study and understanding of the politics of Brexit. Over the last two decades, discourse analysis has established itself as a vibrant set of approaches to understand politics (Krzyżanowski 2010; Lynggaard 2019; Reisigl and Wodak; 2001; Wodak 2006, 2011). As Lynggaard (2019: 160) reminds us, it is “no longer an approach that scholars within this field [EU politics] need to justify anew as a research position”.

In that spirit, this thesis approaches discourse analysis as a distinct perspective for political analysis (for a similar approach see, for instance, Lynggaard 2019; Zappettini 2019a, 2019b; Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019). On a general level, political discourse analysis comprises “inter-and multi-disciplinary research that focuses on the linguistic and discursive dimensions of political text and talk and on the political nature of discursive practice” (Dunmire 2012: 735). The perspective of this thesis is one that conceives discourse analysis as a multi-faceted research approach within the social sciences, subsuming a variety of approaches, each with different theoretical models, research agendas and methods, rather than a generic discourse theory. As such, utilisation of a methodological approach that centres on political discourse analysis enables to analyse “the shared linguistic and discursive formations that shape political identity and frame political action” (McAnulla and Crines 2017: 478), allowing “not only for the political discourse to be captured but also provid[ing] a perspective through which novel interpretations of politics can be made” (Lynggaard 2019: 1). In principle, discourse analysis is a problem-driven research endeavour and, indeed, the problem-driven approach of this thesis is reflected in the very choice of its empirical research object: Brexit.

Further to this, the thesis includes both the written and the spoken in the discourse, relying on Reisigl's and Wodak's (2001) understanding of discourse as the "complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts, which manifest themselves within and across the social fields of action as thematically interrelated semiotic, oral or written tokens, very often as "texts", that belong to specific semiotic types, i.e. genres". It is similar to that of Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 258), for whom discourse is "the language in speech and writing that constitutes a form of social practice".

Regarding the political discourse as such, the understanding thereof employed in this thesis follows that of van Dijk (1997: 12) who sees it as attached to political actors (be it individuals, political institutions and organisations) who are engaged in political processes and events. This positioning of political discourse among other properties of the political system and processes allows researchers to perceive it as a specific case of political (inter)action and a functional or strategic component of the political process (van Dijk 1997).

Among the many variants of discourse analysis, the thesis adopts the general orientation of the Discourse Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak 1996, 2006, 2011). More specifically, it is guided by Krzyżanowski's (2010) operationalization of the Discourse Historical Approach, in accordance with which the analysis follows a two-step procedure, entailing two basic levels: 1) a thematic analysis and 2) an in-depth analysis of argumentation and related linguistic features. Functioning as an initial examination of the data, the thematic analysis concentrates on the embedded, easily detectable dominant narratives that characterise the given discourse (Krzyżanowski 2010: 81-83). It allows to dissect the core themes which form their structure, with the topics identified by means of an indicative analysis, i.e. via "decoding the meaning of text passages – usually taking place via several thorough readings – and then ordering them into lists of key themes and sub-themes" (Krzyżanowski 2010: 81), with the accent being on discourse, and not text, topics. The second level of the analysis then zooms in on the structure of the discourse underlying the said contents, focusing on the employed rhetoric and linguistic devices (Krzyżanowski 2010: 83-89). This level enables the researcher to detect multifarious linguistic and discursive parameters in order to discover what characteristics and attributes the given actors have ascribed to Brexit. I find this two-level analysis particularly convenient, as it allows to gain an insight into various discursive dimensions involving both form (style) and content (proposition).

## **Contribution to the scholarly literature**

Taking a bird's eye view, my research presented in the habilitation thesis has contributed to two very broad strands of the burgeoning literature that seeks to document the discourses of Brexit. In the first place, it has complemented the ongoing empirical research on the discursive drivers of the 2016 referendum and its result, investigating the issue from the perspective of the key political leaders' discourses (Study I; see also, for instance, Wodak 2018 on this) and the Leave and Remain campaigns more broadly (Study II; on this point see also Buckledee 2018; Freedman 2020; Parlington and Zuccato 2018; Spencer and Oppermann 2020; Zappettini, 2019a). This line of research is essential as it holds the promise of at least partially illuminating the reasons behind the success of the Leave vote in the referendum which, as is already well-established by now, was not a mono-causal event but was caused by a myriad of variables, including social class, political allegiance, age, education, geography etc. (Bailey and Budd, 2019; Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017).

In the second place, elucidating the discursive consequences that the British voters' decision has had, my research has joined the existent body of scholarly literature that deals with the post-referendum discourses of Brexit (Studies III, IV and V). It has done so in three distinct, but inter-related ways.

Firstly, I have made new contribution to the expanding literature on the post-referendum discourse vis-à-vis Brexit and the EU employed by politicians and key office holders (Alexandre-Collier 2020; Breeze 2020; Brusenbauch Meislová 2019a; Daddow 2018; Demata 2019; Hansson 2019; Zappettini 2019b). In this respect, I have, for instance, enriched the extant scholarly knowledge on the relationship between technocracy and populism (on this point, see, for instance, Bickerton and Accetti 2017 and Caramani 2017), by explicitly taking a communication-centred perspective and demonstrating that the discursive perspective is a promising avenue for advancing research on populism and technocracy. It is also my hope that I have brought fresh insights into the discursive dimension of the "strategic ambiguity" employed by the British top decision-makers vis-à-vis the EU (for that matter, see also Baker 2002; Brusenbauch Meislová 2019a; Fløttum and Stenvoll 2009; MacMillan 2015).

Secondly, I have extended the literature by providing a discourse-analytical perspective on the discursive representation of the higher education institutions during the Brexit process. Indeed, with the exception of my take on the issue (Brusenbauch Meislová 2021) and that of Courtois and Veiga (2020), who look into the collaborations with the UK in different EU countries through the perspective of discursive institutionalism, there was virtually zero

coverage of the topic in academic literature (on reflections on general Brexit implications for this sector see especially Corbett and Gordon 2018; Courtois and Veiga 2020) and Highman 2017, 2019).

Thirdly, I have contributed to the growing body of academic accounts that scrutinize Brexit-based identity polarisation, suggesting that Brexit has been creating a new source of very intense political identification that is capable of reshaping political divisions (Curtice 2018; Duffy et al. 2019; Hobolt, LEEPE and Tilley 2018; Murray, Plagnola and Corra, 2017). In fact, the attitudes towards Brexit transgress the traditional party lines and are underpinned, both explicitly and implicitly, by strong emotion (Hobolt, LEEPER and Tilley, 2018). By researching how Leavers and Remainers discursively construct the “Other”, I have provided an empirical example of (a part of) collective identity formation and meaning-making in the process of Brexit.

In summation, by illuminating how multiple actors have acted through language in order to influence and change other people’s attitudes towards, and particular ways, of looking at Brexit, and the UK-EU relationship as such, my research has helped shed light on the fairly unique and unprecedented journey of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.

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## 7 CONCLUSION

### Stock-taking

The picture that emerges from the empirical mapping of the discourses of Brexit before, around and after the British in/out referendum is complex, varied and multi-layered. The different contexts, settings, domains and levels of politics included in this habilitation thesis are fittingly reflective of the multi-level, multi-faceted nature of Brexit as well as the actor-specific and context-sensitive discursive trajectories that have been typical for it. Indeed, the studies presented in this thesis all underscore the significance of context-dependency in the discursive practices of Brexit.

As was explicated throughout this thesis, the discursive practices of Brexit have been used in such a way that reflect the actors' strategic language use. It was especially in the case of the Prime Ministers and the Leave and Remain prominent campaigners that the results attested to the instrumental character of their discourse on Brexit and the UK–EU relations and their communicative rationality as individual actors. Importantly, Cameron's (Dorey 2017; Oliver 2017), May's (Figueira and Martill 2020) and Corbyn's (Demata 2019) EU policy has been widely interpreted as inconsistent, schizophrenic and ambiguous and their discursive framings of Brexit, with all their twists, turns, contrasts, discrepancies and inconsistencies, have contributed to that. In this sense, my thesis corroborates findings of the previous research suggesting that for the British top political office holders, framing the UK–EU relationship has long been a policy dilemma of the highest order (for that matter, among others, see Baker 2002; Brusenbauch Meislová 2019; Fløttum and Stenvoll 2009; MacMillan 2015; Worthy and Bennister 2020). We have seen that the political elites under scrutiny here were discursively flexible and pragmatically adapted their discursive identity and rhetorical position vis-à-vis Brexit and the UK–EU relationship on the grounds of their political calculus on the European question. Principally, the persuasive inclusion of conflicting patterning of the Brexit discourses closely reproduces the complexity of the British European agenda. On the evidence so far, the ambivalence of their Brexit discourses stems from their attempts to neutralise the Europe issue and keep it largely off the agenda. In this sense, it aptly exemplifies the long-term struggles of the British political elite to manage its relation to Europe, whilst also nicely illustrating the discursive dimension of populism and technocracy – the two salient features of politics in contemporary Western democracies which seriously challenge the pertinence of the left/right distinction as the major axis of political confrontation (Bickerton and Accetti 2017: 186-187).

Despite variations along actor- and context-specific lines, the thesis has revealed that for the British actors, the European Union has, once again - and in all probability not for the last time -, become a “discursive battleground” (Diez 2001). I have shown how functionally different actors legitimised their interpretations, visions and conceptions of Brexit, and the associated policy choices they proposed (or did not propose), through different linguistic and discursive devices as well as various combinations thereof. As evidenced in the course of thesis, the findings point to the discursive instrumentalization of Brexit for internal political purposes, with the actors strategically exploiting it to justify their approaches to both EU and domestic politics. In this sense, Brexit carries a specific political function, and its discursive articulation is neither arbitrary nor whimsical, but deliberate and calculated.

Finally, what also emerges from the analysis presented in this thesis is the central role played by the self-othering in the discursive constructions of Brexit. The political discourse of the actors subject to investigation here has been replete with references to various out-groups, expressed not in terms of similarities, but differences. This points to the strong in-group/out-group dichotomy as a key structuring device in the discursive constructs of Brexit, with actors viewing their perceptions validated against the other(s). Importantly, this polarised discourse is mirrored in the polarised public opinion of the British vis-à-vis Brexit, with the centre ground quickly hollowing out (Menon 2021; Schumacher 2019). To phrase it in the words of Evans and Menon (2017: 115), referendum has “opened the divisions in British society like bleeding sores”.

Let us now move to key theoretical take-aways from my research. Although the chief contributions to research on discourse and politics have typically been brought by linguists and sociolinguists, political scientists have, too, made significant contributions in this respect (Dunmire 2012; Pelinka 2007: 130). They have investigated, for instance, the role of language in developing the modern nation/state-building (for instance, Bugarski 2004; Edmunds and Juncos 2020), in creation of social cleavages (Kleinnijenhuis and van Atteveldt 2014; Pelinka 2007) or in international negotiation (for instance, Bell 1988; Putnam 2010; Sutherland 2005). As I am, too, a political scientist, this is where the theoretical contribution of my research primarily lies – in exploring the ways in which language is conceived within political practice and the discipline of political science as such.

Essentially, I have been trying to advance the understanding(s) of the practice of politics by highlighting the vital role of discourse therein as well as its politicizing nature. By concentrating on the discursive dimensions of political talk and text, my research has helped

illuminate, if only partially and incompletely, the character, function and structure of political discourse in general. It has confirmed the fundamental, constitutive and inextricable relationship between language on the one hand and politics on the other and exemplified how the meaning-making practices of politics involve both political actions and the political language used to describe them (and create meaning around them).

From a theoretical point of view, my work has also been showing that language can be a very powerful political tool in shaping political action, thereby reinforcing the findings of previous research that show that discourse should be understood *inter alia* as a strategic resource whereby political actors gain and retain power (Dunmire 2011, 2012; Hudson 1978; Shapiro 1981, 1984). According to this perspective, “political statements do not represent ‘cool’, ‘objective’, and ‘comprehensible’ utterances but rather function as ‘a screen, a false scent, a safety net’ designed to achieve political goals, create alliances and oppositions, and present an image of national unity” (Hudson 1978: 61, 41 in Dunmire 2012).

Looking into the dynamic interplay between language and politics in various contexts, my work has also brought fresh insights into the research on the discursive dimension of the strategic ambiguity phenomenon. It was Eisenberg (1984) who realized that there are many instances in which ambiguous communication might be more helpful than clear, straightforward communication, especially during periods of uncertainty and quick change. My research on the (intrinsically political) discourses of Brexit has testified to that, having numerous times pointed out to the use of political strategic ambiguity as a discourse strategy (for more on this, see, for instance, Leith and Davenport 2007; Lynggaard 2019). Last but not least, an important theoretical contribution of my research endeavours lies in the area of the mobilizing force that the language has performed in identity-formation (Leith and Soule 2012; Wodak 1996, Woodhams 2019), having reiterated the key role it has played in constructing, shaping and maintaining political identity(ies).

## **The Way Forward**

Naturally, my research on the discourses of Brexit comes with a number of caveats. It has offered just a tiny snapshot into the vast, rich and highly complex world of the Brexit discourses phenomenon. My research remains primarily exploratory and more in-depth accounts are needed to provide a more complete and comprehensive picture of the Brexit discourses. Geographically, this thesis has its boundaries limited to the British perspective but the realm of the discursive repercussions of Brexit is undoubtedly much broader and wider (please, kindly



see below for the discussion on specific onward research avenues). Another limitation pertains to the fact that the data I have worked with is necessarily limited. Systematic, fine-grained qualitative exploration of the Brexit discourse in even more representative samples, comprising larger numbers of political figures and speeches, would certainly yield more representative results.

Apart from that, I have been relying here exclusively on discourse analysis, so combining it with other research methods carries ample potential for further research. What offers itself rather readily is the combination of Discourse Historical Analysis with content analysis the main strength of which is that it “provides a means of quantifying the contents of a text, and it does so by using a method that is clear and, in principle, repeatable by other researchers” (Denscombe 2014: 285). I have already applied such a mixed-method approach in my research on blame assignments in the Czech and Slovak political discourse of Brexit (Brusenbauch Meislová forthcoming in 2021) where I combined content analysis and the discourse-historical approach to discourse analysis to news releases by executive government actors. Such a combination has enabled me to critically examine the extent to, and ways in, which the highest levels of the Czech and Slovak administrations conveyed, interpreted and evaluated blame in the context of Brexit. This mixed-method research approach is well in line with a key feature of Discourse Historical Analysis, which – unlike other schools of Critical Discourse Studies – accentuates the commitment to triangulate the data to try to minimise the risk of biased results (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak 1996). Besides, applying quantitative research methods (in order to, for instance, investigate the frequency and scope of various Brexit-related discursive elements) might surely be another rewarding avenue for onward research.

Last but not least, as with (almost) every research endeavour in the realm of discourse studies, it is always possible to work further and harder to uncover and explicate in depth the precise objectives of certain discursive features, the extent to which they were, or were not, achieved as well as the drivers behind these patterns and the circumstances and conditionalities of their effects and outreach.

What becomes clear fairly immediately is the fact that the potential of this important research area is far from being exhausted. If anything, the British referendum has brought to the surface a range of highly complex questions that are in need of further discursively-driven reflections. Looking further afield, there is a number of aspects that the political discourse analysis should direct the attention to in years to come, with my own research ambition continuing to lie very much in the empirical field of the British EU policy and Brexit as such.

In principle, there are at least three distinct topical domains within the research into the discursive construction of Brexit that I would like to primarily contribute to in the near future.

First of all, I intend to apply a wider notion of the “political” and look in more detail into how Brexit is discursively articulated not only in the public discourses of the elites in power but also in other contexts and settings of different degrees of formality. Factoring in other domains and corpora such as media articles, social media communication, interviews (on mediatized contexts of Brexit see, for instance, Henkel 2018; Lutzky and Kehoe 2019; Zappettini 2020), parliamentary debates and group discussions (on transnational online communities see, for instance, Kopf 2019, 2020; on private citizens see, for instance, Bouko and Garzia 2019; Lalić-Krstin and Silaški 2019), would allow for a fuller and more in-depth investigation of how Brexit is being formed in the discourse.

Secondly, I would like to delve deeper into the identity-forging potential of Brexit. As intimated in the Introduction and Study IV, the emerging research demonstrates that the withdrawal process has highlighted deepening divides in the British society, with the affective polarization that the Brexit-based identification generates having become an important trend in the UK. As a matter of fact, Leave and Remain affiliations appear a more prominent and intense source of identity than traditional party identification (Curtice, 2018; Duffy et al. 2019: 16; Murray, Plagnola and Corra, 2017). The ensuing polarization is rather intense, both explicitly and implicitly, in terms of emotional commitment, affect, stereotyping, prejudice and various evaluative biases (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley 2018). Yet, surprisingly little academic effort has been spent on explaining how these Brexit identities, be it individual or collective, are construed in the public discourse. Against this backdrop, it is my intention to add to the further discussion of this fascinating phenomenon, especially in a sense of researching the social and political discursive cleavages generated by Brexit and the discursive articulation of contemporary Brexit-based identifications (their expressions, developments and perhaps also potential readjustments).

Thirdly, but no less importantly, I find it essential to widen the empirical focus and look also beyond the borders of the UK, as its withdrawal from the EU has, and will continue to have, a myriad of lasting international repercussions, which come with their own discursive dimensions. I have already done some academic work in this respect. Most recently, I have co-edited, together with Veronika Koller, Susanne Kopf and Marlene Miglbauer, a special issue of the CADAAD Journal (Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines) on the discursive recontextualization of Brexit outside of the UK. My own contribution to this special issue has taken stock of how the Czech and Slovak governments have assigned blame for Brexit

to either the EU or the UK. My findings show that both governments have drawn on narratives of the EU as a failure and a dysfunctional and incompetent institution as well as on the narratives of misjudgement, indecision and lost control on the UK's part. Both governments have also applied various blame-attribution strategies such as argumentation, framing and (de)legitimization. The comparative analysis further revealed that the Czech government tends to blame the EU, its leaders and institutions, for Brexit, while the Slovak government primarily blames the UK for the damage done to the European project (Brusenbauch Meislová forthcoming in 2021).

Apart from that, together with Balazs Szent-Iványi, we have traced how Brexit was framed and exploited by two EU member state governments, Czechia and Hungary. We conceptualized Brexit as a “distant crisis” for these two countries: although it is likely to have significant impacts, these are uncertain and not immediate. We showed that distant crises lead to different framing opportunities for political actors as opposed to the ones generally featured in the crisis framing literature, especially in terms of the incentives to apportion blame on external versus domestic adversaries and the utilization of crisis to call for a change. Building on the crisis-framing literature, we applied frame analysis to examine governmental rhetoric and found that both governments have instrumentalized Brexit for internal purposes. As evidenced in the paper, Brexit was exploited with the goal of legitimizing the government's actions and anti-EU, pro-sovereignty rhetoric. Indeed, even though both governments officially endorsed and complied with the EU's official Brexit position, they did not refrain from apportioning Brexit-related blame on the EU (if to varying degrees), or even questioning some of its decisions. Also, as the two cases have demonstrated, formal calls for EU reform, prompted by a distant crisis, did not necessarily mean that the governments really would like to challenge the status quo (Brusenbauch Meislová and Szent-Iványi 2021).

Having said that, the discursive portrayal of Brexit outside of the UK did spark some scholarly interest. It is especially the representation of Brexit in non-UK media that has garnered increasing attention among scholars (Adler-Nissen, Galpin, and Rosamond 2017; Chaban and Elgström 2019; Degano and Sicurella 2019; Filardo-Llamas 2021; Knoblock 2021; Krzyżanowski 2019; Mármol Queraltó 2021; Tincheva 2019a) come under scrutiny. Apart from that, some academic ground on the EU and its institutions (Bennett 2019b), banks (Aiezza 2021) and the wider public, including media consumers or participants in online debates (Kopf 2019; Miglbauer and Koller 2021; Ruzza and Pejovic 2019) has been covered, too. With this in mind, it is my intention to continue this promising line of research and further unveil the importance of Brexit's discursive recontextualization outside of the UK, especially in a sense of looking

into the distinctive national variations thereof and applying a broader, systematic comparative perspective of EU27 member states that would go well beyond single case studies.

As a final thought, with Brexit representing the moving target, the research on its discourses is inevitably a work in progress, very much like the nature of the UK-EU relationship itself. Brexit has not resolved the issue of the UK's relationship with the EU. Far from it. Even though the initial shock might have worn off, Brexit – to phrase it prosaically in the words of Hayes (2021) - “will never be done. Because it can never be done. Not for as long as the UK sits 50km off the European mainland and does 50% of its business with Europe. Not when the island of Ireland sits behind it – and the north east corner of that island is contested political ground”. As Winston Churchill once famously said “Europe is where the weather comes from”. Hence, the centrality of the European Union to British politics, and vice versa, is not going away and the mutual relationship, destined to be open-ended and in a constant state of flux, is to remain at the forefront of the British and wider European political landscape. As such, it will be fascinating to watch how its nuanced discursive constructions and their dynamics in various contexts evolve.

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