

## **The Reconstruction of National Identity in UK: The Impact of Brexit on Internal Divisions and Global Positioning**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Over the past 40 years since joining the European Union, the UK's national identity has always been accompanied by Euroscepticism. With the combined efforts of various factors, the Brexit referendum has led to a revolutionary change in the UK's national identity. After Brexit, the UK faced domestic separatism and drastic changes internationally. This paper is a preliminary investigation of Britain's national identity in the context of the decision of the UK to leave the European Union. This paper analyses Brexit in relation to changes in British national identity. It begins by analysing what the concept of "identity" and "national identity" are, and then examine current discourses surrounding Brexit and national identity. It traces the ways in which British national identity has been renegotiated through its internal identity crisis from Scotland and North Ireland, the identity construction with EU relations, and UK's global role positioning. This analysis provides empirical cases for understanding the identity changes of nation states in the process of globalization and regional integration.*

**Key words:** Brexit; National Identity; Identity Politics; EU; Globalization

### **Introduction**

National identity is an important concept in international relations, which comes from the definition of individual identity in psychology and philosophy and has become a political and academic vocabulary since the 1950s. To better understand national identity, it needs to understand the concept of identity. Identity refers to an intrinsic property of an individual or a group, something that can be possessed or lost by an individual or a collective, which categorises a particular individual or group from others and reflects the relationship between the individual and the other. However, this intrinsic property of an individual or group is not permanent and

universal.<sup>1</sup> National identity, on the other hand, emphasises the historical and cultural community within the context of the nation-state as a fundamental attribute that distinguishes a nation from others, and has gradually become a central concept in the research agendas of political science, anthropology, and other disciplines on the nation-state and nationalism. In this context, national identity-the characteristics of the country in terms of shared historical memory, political and economic systems, cultural traditions and others is the basis of the people's identification with their own country.As for Anthony Smith, national identity is a perception of "political community, territory, homeland, citizenship, shared values and traditions", with attributes of history, territory, shared memory, popular culture, law and economics dimensions.<sup>2</sup> A country's national identity is generally formed and changed in its relations and interactions with other countries, and cultural and institutional factors in the country's internal and external environments also contribute to the construction of national identity. National identity is a not a substance but a cluster of tendencies and values, that it is neither fixed nor alterable at will, and that it needs to be periodically redefined in the light of historically inherited characteristics, resent needs, and future aspirations.<sup>3</sup> Under globalization and European integration, the change of national identity faces the tension between its internal and external identity characteristics, especially for UK. As a landmark in the development of populism and anti-globalisation in today's world, the change in the UK's national identity brought about by the Brexit referendum is particularly noteworthy.

The UK has been on the long journey to the brexit referendum since 23 June 2016.On 31 January 2020, the Council of the European Union voted to approve the agreement on the UK's plan to leave the European Union, which marks the end of the Brexit process and the 47-year partnership between the UK and the EU. The academia have paid much attention to the brexit, mostly focusing on a systematic review of the reasons for it, the future relationships of UK and EU after Brexit, and the development of the UK itself. Although there is a small amount of research on the change of British national identity, there is still a gap in the research on the transformation of British national identity in the context of Brexit. This article will focus on the significant event of Brexit in the UK, analyzing the changes in the UK's national identity from three aspects: internal identity adjustment, the future direction of EU relations, and UK's global role positioning. Conducting interdisciplinary research on this issue not only helps to expand empirical research

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<sup>1</sup> Bělohrad R. Fukuyama, Francis: Identity. The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment[J]. 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Smith. National Identity. London: Penguin. 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Bhikhu Parekh (1995): The concept of national identity, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 21:2, 255-268

within Europe, but also highlights the academic value of area studies in the context of globalization.

### **1. UK's Identity Crisis from Scotland&North Ireland**

The construction of a national identity in the UK is often considered successful, constructive, and exemplary. Until today, no one can deny that the UK has played an important and prominent role in the evolution of world history and international relations.<sup>4</sup> However, with the independence of overseas colonies and the rise of the United States after World War II, Britain had to face the reality of declining world influence and global status due to its own national strength. At the same time, national identity has also become a very prominent issue that troubles the UK. The issue of "deanglicization" has not been resolved due to the long history and colonial experience of Britain.<sup>5</sup> Under the influence of Northern Ireland's national separatism, democratic consciousness and regional power consciousness have also continued to grow in Scotland. The issue of Scottish independence emerged in this context.

Scottish issues has profound historical origins, economic motives, and political party backgrounds. It is a microcosm of the crisis of national identity in the UK, which means that the construction of national identity in the UK is very limited.<sup>6</sup> Scotland has a profound and long-standing historical and cultural connection with European countries, especially France. It can even be said that the historical and cultural connection between Scottish people and the European continent exceeds to some extent their connection with Britain. Compared to Englishmen who have a strong suspicion of Europe, Scotland have a more favorable European sentiment and identify more with European identity. Due to differences in historical, cultural, and practical interests, the stance of the majority of Scots towards Europe differs from that of the British government and the majority of British people. In other words, the British government's stance towards Europe deviates from the mainstream public opinion of Scots. Under the British government's control of foreign affairs, in order to respect the wishes of the majority of Scots and maintain their people's sovereignty, the only way to independence from the United Kingdom is to follow this path.

In Northern Ireland, the complex history of border issues and Anglo Irish relations is intertwined,

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<sup>4</sup> 吴志成, 赵圆圆. 英国参与全球治理分析[J]. 南开学报(哲学社会科学版), 2014, (4).

<sup>5</sup> Atsuko Ichijo, Scottish Nationalism and the Idea of Europe Concepts of Europe and the Nation, p.75.

<sup>6</sup> 王业昭. 英格兰民族的构建与民族特性的演变[J]. 世界民族, 2009, (3).

bringing renewed attention to the Northern Ireland issue that has temporarily been resolved since the Belfast Agreement. <sup>7</sup>The relationship between Ireland and the UK has complex religious reasons. The conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism was resolved in the late 1990s. After joining the European Community in 1992, Ireland's national identity underwent a significant transformation. The emphasis on basic connotations such as independence, sovereignty, and ethnicity and openness to the outside world has been transmitted to the economic and social fields, bringing about changes in the form of national governance. Unlike British colonialism in history, the principles of sovereignty sharing under EU, the unity in diversity, and protection of ethnic and cultural diversity are conducive to achieving mutual strengthening and common development of national and European identities.<sup>8</sup> Brexit further changed the deep-rooted dependence on Britain in Irish national history, which becomes a key historical node in redefining Ireland's national identity. Brexit has intensified political and ethnic divisions within Northern Ireland, leading to a return to identity politics. The new identity politics and traditional identity politics caused by Brexit are intertwined, adding a game dimension of EU identity beyond the existing ethnic and religious divisions in Northern Ireland.

Originally, the current Brexit crisis in Scotland and Northern Ireland stems from the decline of British national power.<sup>9</sup> However, due to the strong opposition of the British government and the lack of support from the United States and the European Union, it is feared that the independence of Scotland and Ireland will not be realised within a short period of time, and in the absence of a significant improvement in the economic and international status of the United Kingdom, the issue of the independence of Scotland and Northern Ireland may continue to plague the development and stability of the United Kingdom from time to time in the future, and it also plays a key role in shaping a complete and unified United Kingdom's national identity. While Britain's external national identity is generally stable, and internally there has been separatism due to history, religion and other issues that continue to this day, one of the concepts of national

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Todd, "From Identity Politics to Identity Change: Exogenous Shocks, Constitutional oments and the impact of Brexit on the Island of Ireland, " *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 28, 2017, pp. 57 – 72.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Hession, "Riding Three Horses at Once: Ireland's EU Membership as A National Development Strategy, " p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Mary C. Murphy, "The European Union and 'Normal' Politics in Northern Ireland, " *European Studies*, Vol. 28, 2010, pp. 190 – 191.

identity is generally stable, but with the intervention of the major event of Brexit, the internal national identity of the UK, and the different perceptions of Britain's nature, have affected Britain's internal values as a United Kingdom in different dimensions, and the issue of Scottish and Northern Irish independence is like a dagger in the eye of a dagger. The independence of Scotland and Northern Ireland is a sword of Damocles hanging over the UK, leaving its national identity in limbo.

## **2. UK's Identity without EU**

National identity is constrained by historical and cultural traditions, as well as political and economic factors, but it is not entirely constructed by these factors. National identity is a process of mutual construction between internal and external factors. In this process, national identity is not only the result of self-identity, but also closely related to the perception of its role by others (other members of the international system.<sup>10</sup>One important factor for Brexit is its distinct identity from other European countries. As a former empire that never sets, Britain's accession to the European Community was to some extent a process of searching for its own internal and external roles after World War II. In 1963, when Charles de Gaulle rejected Britain's application to join the European Community, he emphasized that "Britain is a remote maritime country, with trade, markets, and food supply coming from different, usually the most remote countries... All of its activities have very special and unique customs and traditions..."<sup>11</sup>As a maritime country, the United Kingdom has a distinct identity as "the other" compared to European countries, and this identity has become a classic expression of Eurosceptics emphasizing the uniqueness of British identity. All of this has led to "the UK being accustomed to being independent in the EU and often going against the European integration process"<sup>12</sup> Brexit is the result of long-maturing processes of economic and social development reinforcing each other. A significant part of the British elite raised on imperial tradition with a global mindset and with attitudes deeply rooted in their specific political culture. It could never embrace European integration wholeheartedly, or confine their ambitions to the pursuit of regional interests. The British have always been leading advocates of free trade; in case the European cooperation exceeded this level, they either skipped it ,for instance, Britain refused to participate in the euro zone Schengen policy even as that time it remained as an EU member.

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<sup>10</sup> 王展鹏,夏添.脱欧公投与英国国家身份变迁[J].武汉大学学报:哲学社会科学版,2019,72(1):187-200.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Leruth. Christopher Lord. Differentiated Integration in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*,2015, 22(6).

<sup>12</sup> 潘兴明. 英国对欧政策新取向探析[J]. 外交评论, 2014, (4).

In the process of European integration, the inherent historical, cultural, political and economic identity characteristics of member states are important factors for the construction of European collective identity by the people, political parties, and countries.<sup>13</sup> The evolution of EU integration also has a shaping effect on the national identity of member states. Participating in integration means reshaping national identity by leveraging a European identity that is in opposition to one's own traditions. The uniqueness of British history and culture has made it difficult to construct its national identity from European dimension. Through constant twists, turns, and resistance, Euroscepticism has also become a label of British national identity, and ultimately leading to Brexit. The identity of the UK after Brexit undoubtedly conforms to the goal of Eurosceptics - to eliminate the impact of European integration and return to the UK's own traditions. The Conservative Party's shift towards Euroscepticism is not only a response to the changing European identity of the UK, but also a major driver of its further evolution in Europe. Although the proposal to join the European Community was proposed by the leader of the Conservative Party, after joining the EU, the Conservative Party has always lacked enthusiasm for the European supranational governance model and the ideal of deepening integration.

The "black swan" event of Brexit will undoubtedly bring about a change in the UK's national identity due to the transformation of its relationship with the EU. However, the transformation of the relationship between the UK and the EU will not be drastic. As far as the relation between the UK and the EU is concerned, nothing has changed for the time being. After Brexit, Britain will return to its position as a maritime power country and revive the glory of the empire. The least we can say is that there is a huge amount of uncertainty regarding the consequences of Brexit. What emerges is a key question: if the dispute around the future of the border can be resolved through additional forms of UK–EU integration and co-operation, then a new settlement short of membership can be imagined; if the Protocol collapses, then a series of further destabilisations are inevitable.<sup>14</sup> Despite the uncertainty, the UK's national identity has undergone further transformation with Brexit. In its contact with the European Union, the UK will further shape its "the other" identity to distinguish EU member states, thereby proving the rationality of its departure from the EU and consolidating its image of reshaping its identity as a Great Britain after leaving the EU. This image must go beyond its status as an EU member state and is closely related to the UK's identity as a great power and the glory of its former empire.

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<sup>13</sup> Penelope J. Oakes, S. Alexander Haslam, John C. Turner. *Stereotyping and Social Reality*. Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Wager A. A stable equilibrium? Brexit, the border and the future of the UK–EU relationship[J]. *Journal of European Integration*, 2022, 44(4): 591-596.

### **3. UK's Global Role Positioning**

Since the UK voted to leave the European Union in June 2016, the debate about the UK's place in global affairs has intensified. Throughout the Brexit process, politicians, academics and others have assessed what Brexit means for the UK's international importance and standing. In 2016, the former Prime Minister Theresa May formalised the slogan Global Britain, as 'an ambitious vision for Britain after Brexit' in which the UK would govern itself, advocate free trade, promote peace and prosperity, and protect the interests of itself and others.<sup>15</sup> Global Britain has been endorsed by government departments and ministers ever since.

Through its discourses on Global Britain, the UK Government writes into being a particular version of British national identity rooted in international relationships. An internationalist identity narrative for the United Kingdom is neither novel nor tied exclusively to Britain's withdrawal from the European Union. The post-Brexit Global Britain vision draws on historical discourses of Britishness to project an influential future identity for the nation.<sup>16</sup> While the UK government's post-2016 narrative of Global Britain is seductive and comforting, with selectivities to mask its imperial foundations and boost its acceptance, it is flawed as a foreign policy blueprint for several interconnected reasons.

First, Global Britain is in essence a domestic rather than an international narrative. With its principal intended audience the British public, Global Britain is inherently facing as a party-political rallying call to voters more than a serious foreign policy strategy. The second flaw is that a Global Britain is fundamentally regressive rather than progressive. The wider anachronism of global Britain also contradicts the interests of international partners. The Commonwealth may be a source of post-imperial pride for Britain, but its members prioritise regional relationships, such as with their neighbours, with global powers such as the US, China and even Europe. As for Global Britain, prioritising the Commonwealth over the EU would ultimately be at odds with the world view of the member states and would diminish the Commonwealth's identity construction with the UK.<sup>17</sup> Under such circumstances, Britain's national identity has been challenged not only from the secession trend of Scotland and Northern Ireland, but also from the

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<sup>15</sup> J. May 'Read in full: Theresa May's Conservative conference speech on Brexit', 2 October 2016

<sup>16</sup> Daddow O, GlobalBritainTM: The discursive construction of Britain's post-Brexit world role. *Global Affairs* 5(1): 5–22, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Beaumont, 'Brexit, retrotopia and the perils of post-colonial delusions', *Global Affairs* 3: 4–5, Oct. 2017, 47 pp. 379–90.

Commonwealth countries not to prioritize the United Kingdom in other international relations. The shaping of Britain's national identity has faced many challenges after Brexit. The third and perhaps most important reason for why Global Britain fails as a foreign policy programme is that it fundamentally contradicts the understandings and preferences of international partners about what the modern-day UK represents. Since 2016, Global Britain has already revealed a broad and highly problematic mismatch between its sense of self and the assessments of the international partners it requires to succeed.<sup>18</sup> With the UK now a minor trade partner to most Asian countries by virtue of both geography and size, regional governments seek alternative gains. This was the misalignment between the ambitions of Global Britain and the priorities of international others.

“Global Britain” is a new diplomatic positioning proposed by British political elites in response to the structural change of Brexit, with the original intention of increasing trust, dispelling doubts, and inspiring people.<sup>19</sup> The national identity of the UK has undergone a transformation after Brexit, and the global UK strategy launched at this time can promote a brighter future for the UK after Brexit, reduce the differences between Brexit and stay in Europe factions, and demonstrate its regained "sovereign state" identity of freedom; As for the world, it can be declared that the UK will firmly support globalization and continue to play a major role. Britain urgently needs to demonstrate its national identity as a great power at this historical moment. Global Britain is more than a notion for UK international engagement, and more than the foreign policy blueprint it purports to provide. It is an autobiographical narrative about what Britain is and what it envisions the world and the newly-built national identity after Brexit to be.<sup>20</sup> However, the global British strategy has abandoned the diplomatic tradition of relying on Europe in its development. The underlying message of the "Global Britain" strategy is that the UK, free from the constraints of the EU, has greater effort for development on the world stage. The implicit disregard for the European Union is a replica of the British exceptionalism.<sup>21</sup> From the above, it can be seen that Brexit did not bring about diplomatic independence and instead fell into many difficulties. Meanwhile, the ambition to reshape its national identity as “Empire 2.0”

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<sup>18</sup>Chow W M, Han E, Li X. Brexit identities and British public opinion on China[J]. *International Affairs*, 2019, 95(6): 1369-1387.

<sup>19</sup> Glencross A, McCourt D. Living up to a new role in the world: the challenges of “Global Britain”[J]. *Orbis*, 2018, 62(4): 582-597.

<sup>20</sup> Saunders R. Brexit and Empire: ‘Global Britain’ and the myth of imperial nostalgia[J]. *The journal of imperial and commonwealth history*, 2020, 48(6): 1140-1174.

<sup>21</sup> 李靖堃.“全球英国”外交战略:愿景、实践与制约因素[J].*当代世界*,2023(8):38-45.

through “Global Britain” is also difficult to achieve.

### **Conclusion**

National identity is not fixed or unchanging, and identity issues are having a profound and wide-ranging impact on the historical fate of Britain. In the future, it remains to be seen whether the UK will divide into several small countries, continue to exist as the United Kingdom, or gradually integrate into Europe and become a part of the EU.<sup>22</sup> The changes in national identity is mainly channelled through shaping the specific political, economic, diplomatic and social systems of the country, which in turn have a transmissible effect on more stable national identity features. Participation in European integration has brought about significant shifts in policies, institutions and even national identities for most European Union member States, and the lower the match between elements of national identity, such as domestic political and cultural traditions and patterns of economic and social development, and the direction of integration, the greater the resistance to, and pressure for, Europeanisation in the context of European integration.<sup>23</sup> The Brexit in this critical juncture has accelerated the process of its national identity change.

The United Kingdom is still a major world power, but it is not as glorious as it once was. Internally, UK faces a trend towards separation as a United Kingdom. Due to historical reasons, Scotland and Northern Ireland's relationship with the UK is already complex. In addition, facing with Brexit, Scotland and Northern Ireland's strong desire to stay in Europe is at odds with England and Wales. This has brought about a series of chain reactions, making Britain's national identity even more unstable and facing internal disintegration. The death of Queen Elizabeth II, who reigned for the longest time in UK's history, has also become a catalyst for the separation. At the same time, the ruling Conservative Party itself has fallen into populism and ideology crisis. In addition to the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic, it is more difficult for Britain to achieve its ambition of a great power, and its ambition to reshape its national identity of "Empire 2.0" through Brexit ; In its interactions with the European Union, UK has left many obstacles including personnel exchanges, goods transportation, border control, immigration issues. The EU remains an important partner of the UK. How to maintain or even repair relationships with cracks has become a major issue facing the UK today. And the national identity as a sovereign

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<sup>22</sup> Carl N, Dennison J, Evans G. European but not European enough: An explanation for Brexit[J]. *European Union Politics*, 2019, 20(2): 282-304.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Todd, “From Identity Politics to Identity Change: Exogenous Shocks, Constitutional Moments and the Impact of Brexit on the Island of Ireland, ”pp. 1 – 16.

power established after leaving the EU will inevitably face countless blocks ; As for international positioning, the Global Britain strategy proposed by the UK has encountered structural difficulties. Whether the UK has completely become a vassal of the United States or become a pragmatic medium-sized power depends not only on the trend of changes in the world pattern, but also on the wisdom and choices of the UK's decision-makers. The impact of Brexit has become another key historical node in the transformation of national identity.

In the face of the unprecedented changes in the world over the past century, and the intensification of identity politics caused by nationalism, populism and “new cold war” mentality, both UK and the world need to ponder over how to overcome the constraints of difference and seek consensus on the basis of diversity, and realise a progressive change of their national identity .