JE International Journal of Legal Theory and Philosophy
E-ISSN: 0123-3210 || P-ISSN: 0123-3210

BREXIT CASE STUDY: IMPLICATIONS OF A COUNTRY'S WITHDRAWAL FROM AN INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENT

Faadiyah Afiifah[1]✉, Ingga Aulia H.[2], Alexandra Olivia[3]

[1,2,3]Faculty of Law, Universitas Sriwijaya, Indonesia
✉Email: inggaauliahafizah@gmail.com

Received: August 4, 2026 Published: November 23, 2026

Abstract: Brexit raises fundamental questions about the exercise of state sovereignty and the consequences of withdrawing from a supranational organization. This study examines whether Brexit strengthens or limits state sovereignty under international law and analyzes its political, economic, and social implications for the United Kingdom and the European Union. Employing normative legal research with statutory, conceptual, and case approaches, supported by secondary empirical data, this study examines the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, relevant judicial decisions, and post-withdrawal agreements. The findings demonstrate that Brexit expanded the United Kingdom's regulatory autonomy while remaining subject to domestic constitutional requirements, international withdrawal procedures, and continuing treaty obligations. Politically, Brexit ended British participation in EU decision-making and intensified territorial constitutional tensions. Economically, it introduced trade barriers despite sustained commercial interdependence. Socially, it restricted freedom of movement while preserving certain citizens' rights under the Withdrawal Agreement. These findings establish that Brexit represents a transformation in the exercise of state sovereignty rather than its unconditional restoration, as greater legal autonomy does not necessarily eliminate international obligations or political, economic, and social interdependence.

Keywords: Brexit; State Sovereignty; International Law; Treaty Withdrawal; European Union.

Open access article under the CC BY–4.0 license

INTRODUCTION

The termination of a state's participation in an international treaty raises legal questions concerning sovereignty and previously agreed obligations. Article 54 of the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT) permits withdrawal in accordance with the treaty's provisions or by consent of all parties after consultation. Meanwhile, Article 70 provides that termination generally does not affect rights, obligations, or legal situations established through the execution of the

treaty, unless otherwise agreed.[1] Accordingly, the right to terminate treaty obligations must be distinguished from the legal consequences of termination. This issue becomes more complex when a state withdraws from a supranational organization with integrated institutions, competences, and legal systems.

Brexit illustrates withdrawal from such a supranational system. In the referendum held on 23 June 2016, 51.9% of voters supported leaving the European Union, while 48.1% voted to remain, with a turnout of 72.2%.[2] The United Kingdom submitted its withdrawal notification on 29 March 2017,[3] formally left the European Union on 31 January 2020, and underwent a transition period until 31 December 2020.[4] Legally, Article 5 VCLT recognizes the specific rules of international organizations, while Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) establishes the withdrawal procedure.[5] The *Miller* judgment (2017) required statutory authorization from Parliament before notification,[6] whereas *Wightman* (2018) recognized the possibility of unilaterally revoking such notification before withdrawal became effective, subject to certain conditions.[7]

Brexit also raises questions concerning the relationship between state authority, referendum legitimacy, and parliamentary sovereignty.[8] The termination of membership did not extinguish all legal relations with the European Union. The *Withdrawal Agreement* preserves certain rights and obligations,[9] the *Trade and Cooperation Agreement* (TCA) establishes a new framework for cooperation,[10] and the *Windsor*

---

[1] United Nations, *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, May 23, 1969, 1155 UNTS 331, arts. 54 and 70, https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf.

[2] Electoral Commission, *The 2016 EU Referendum: Report on the 23 June 2016 Referendum on the UK's Membership of the European Union* (September 2016), https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/2016-EU-referendum-report.pdf.

[3] UK Government, "Prime Minister's Letter to Donald Tusk Triggering Article 50," March 29, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prime-ministers-letter-to-donald-tusk-triggering-article-50.

[4] Council of the European Union, "EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement," accessed November 20, 2026, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/the-eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/.

[5] United Nations, *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, art. 5; European Union, *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*, Official Journal of the European Union C 202 (June 7, 2016), art. 50, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12016M050.

[6] *R (on the Application of Miller and Another) v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union* [2017] UKSC 5, January 24, 2017, https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2016-0196.

[7] *Wightman and Others v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union*, Case C-621/18, ECLI:EU:C:2018:999 (Court of Justice of the European Union, December 10, 2018), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:62018CJ0621.

[8] Eoin Daly, "Popular Sovereignty after Brexit," *German Law Journal* 23, no. 1 (2022): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2022.3.

[9] Council of the European Union, "EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement."

[10] European Commission, "EU Trade Relations with the United Kingdom," accessed November 20, 2026, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/united-kingdom_en.

Framework modifies arrangements concerning Northern Ireland.[11] Politically, the United Kingdom lost its participation in EU decision-making, while Scotland and Northern Ireland faced constitutional tensions.[12] Economically, trade barriers increased despite the availability of preferential tariff arrangements.[13] The OBR estimates that the United Kingdom's long-term potential productivity will be approximately 4% lower than under a scenario of continued EU membership, while the European Union still accounted for 41% of UK exports and 50% of its imports in 2025.[14] Socially, changes to freedom of movement have affected mobility and citizens' legal status, although certain protections remain applicable.[15]

Previous studies have examined these issues from different perspectives. Daly discusses popular sovereignty and the constitutional legitimacy of the Brexit referendum;[16] Ganderson and colleagues examine the institutional design of Article 50 TEU;[17] Peers analyzes the legal consequences of the *Withdrawal Agreement*;[18] while Bressanelli and Chelotti investigate institutional adjustments within the European Union.[19] These studies provide important foundations for understanding the United Kingdom's withdrawal. However, their respective focuses do not, in themselves, provide an integrated account of the relationship between the authority to withdraw, the legal requirements governing its implementation, the sources of post-withdrawal obligations, and its multidimensional consequences. This study therefore examines these interconnected dimensions without claiming that similar research has never been conducted.

---

[11] Council of the European Union, "EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement," section "Windsor Framework."

[12] Nicola McEwen and Mary C. Murphy, "Brexit and the Union: Territorial Voice, Exit and Re-entry Strategies in Scotland and Northern Ireland after EU Exit," *International Political Science Review* 43, no. 3 (2022): 374–89, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512121990543.

[13] European Commission, "EU Trade Relations with the United Kingdom."

[14] Office for Budget Responsibility, "Brexit Analysis," accessed November 20, 2026, https://obr.uk/forecasts-in-depth/the-economy-forecast/brexit-analysis/; Matthew Ward and Dominic Webb, *Statistics on UK–EU Trade*, Research Briefing CBP-7851 (House of Commons Library, June 12, 2026), https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7851/.

[15] European Commission, "Citizens' Rights," accessed November 20, 2026, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/relations-united-kingdom/eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/citizens-rights-0_en.

[16] Daly, "Popular Sovereignty after Brexit."

[17] Joseph Ganderson et al., "A Very European Way Out: Polity Maintenance and the Design of Article 50," *Government and Opposition* 60, no. 1 (2025): 207–28, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2023.44.

[18] Steve Peers, "The End—or a New Beginning? The EU/UK Withdrawal Agreement," *Yearbook of European Law* 39 (2020): 122–98, https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaa010.

[19] Edoardo Bressanelli and Nicola Chelotti, "Assessing What Brexit Means for Europe: Implications for EU Institutions and Actors," *Politics and Governance* 9, no. 1 (2021): 1–4, https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i1.3982.

Against this background, this study examines Brexit as a case of transformation in how a state exercises sovereignty following withdrawal from a supranational organization. The legal analysis focuses on the relationship between the VCLT and Article 50 TEU, the constitutional requirements examined in *Miller* and *Wightman*, and the distinction between the legal consequences of treaty termination, obligations under the *Withdrawal Agreement*, and new commitments established through the TCA. The political, economic, and social analysis assesses changes in UK–EU relations by distinguishing direct legal consequences, observed empirical developments, and estimates. Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions: First, to what extent does Brexit represent a strengthening of state sovereignty, and what legal limitations govern its implementation under modern international law? Second, what are the political, economic, and social implications of Brexit for the United Kingdom and the European Union?

METHODS

This study employs a normative legal research method using statutory, conceptual, and case approaches, supported by a descriptive analysis of secondary empirical data. Primary legal materials include the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT), Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the *Miller* and *Wightman* judgments, the *Withdrawal Agreement*, the *Trade and Cooperation Agreement*, and the *Windsor Framework*. Secondary legal materials consist of relevant scholarly literature and journal articles. To examine the political, economic, and social implications of Brexit, this study draws on institutional reports and official statistics from the United Kingdom and the European Union. Legal materials and supporting data were collected through literature review and the examination of official documents. The materials were analyzed qualitatively through legal interpretation, judicial decision analysis, and an assessment of the relationship between legal provisions and the implementation of Brexit. Secondary empirical data were used to explain developments and consequences associated with withdrawal, while distinguishing observed facts from estimates and avoiding causal claims unsupported by evidence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Brexit as a Strengthening or Limitation of State Sovereignty in Modern International Law

State sovereignty includes the authority to enter into and withdraw from international treaties, but its exercise remains subject to applicable legal rules. Within the European Union, supranational competences derive from powers conferred by Member States under Article 5 TEU. Brexit therefore illustrates the United Kingdom's authority to terminate its membership, although state sovereignty must be distinguished from popular and parliamentary sovereignty within its constitutional order.[20] Under the VCLT, Article 42(2) requires termination or withdrawal to rest on the treaty or the Convention; Article 54 permits withdrawal under treaty provisions or by agreement of all parties after consultation; and Article 56 governs limited circumstances where no withdrawal clause exists.[21] Withdrawal consequently involves a legally regulated power, not an unrestricted unilateral entitlement.

Article 56 VCLT was not the direct basis of Brexit because Article 50 TEU expressly regulates withdrawal. Article 5 VCLT preserves the relevant rules of international organizations, while Article 54(a) recognizes withdrawal pursuant to treaty provisions; Article 50 thus operates as *lex specialis* within the broader framework of treaty law.[22] Under Article 50(1)–(2), a Member State decides to withdraw in accordance with its constitutional requirements, notifies the European Council, and negotiates withdrawal arrangements, taking account of future relations. The Council concludes the agreement by qualified majority after the European Parliament's consent; that consent concerns the agreement, not permission to leave.[23] Under Article 50(3), membership may also end two years after notification without an agreement, unless the European Council unanimously agrees with the withdrawing state to extend the period.[24]

Domestic constitutional requirements proved decisive in *R (Miller) v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union* (2017). The UK Supreme Court held that executive prerogative powers could not be used to change domestic law enacted by Parliament, including rights arising through the *European Communities Act 1972*. The referendum expressed a political choice but did not itself amend legislation or authorize notification under Article 50 TEU.[25] Parliament subsequently

[20] Daly, "Popular Sovereignty after Brexit"; European Union, *Treaty on European Union*, arts. 5(1)–(2) and 50(1).
[21] *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, arts. 42(2), 54, and 56.
[22] *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, arts. 5 and 54(a); European Union, *Treaty on European Union*, art. 50.
[23] European Union, *Treaty on European Union*, art. 50(1)–(2).
[24] European Union, *Treaty on European Union*, art. 50(3).
[25] *Miller*, [2017] UKSC 5, paras. 101, 119–24.

enacted the *European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017*, authorizing the Prime Minister to notify the European Council.[26] *Miller* therefore distinguishes the sovereign political decision to withdraw from the constitutional authority required to implement it. Parliamentary authorization was a domestic legal prerequisite, not an EU-imposed veto over withdrawal.

The possibility of reversing notification was clarified in *Wightman and Others v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union* (2018). The Court of Justice held that a Member State could unilaterally revoke its Article 50 notification before withdrawal took effect, provided revocation followed national constitutional requirements, was communicated in writing, and was unequivocal and unconditional, confirming continued membership on unchanged terms.[27] Unlike an extension of the withdrawal period, which requires a unanimous European Council decision and the state's agreement, lawful revocation requires no approval from other Member States. After withdrawal becomes effective, however, rejoining requires the accession procedure under Article 49 TEU, pursuant to Article 50(5).[28] The distinction preserves national choice within a procedural framework while separating withdrawal, revocation, extension, and readmission.

The United Kingdom ceased to be an EU Member State on 31 January 2020, but EU law did not immediately cease to apply. The *Withdrawal Agreement*, effective on 1 February 2020, established a transition period ending on 31 December 2020. Articles 126 and 127 generally maintained the application of EU law to and in the United Kingdom during that period, subject to exceptions.[29] The Agreement also preserved specified citizens' rights under Part Two. Article 4 requires the stipulated legal effects of the Agreement and applicable EU law, including direct effect where its conditions are satisfied and corresponding domestic judicial protection.[30] Thus, the end of institutional membership must be distinguished from the continuation of agreed legal obligations and enforceable individual protections.

---

[26] *European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017*, c. 9, sec. 1 (UK), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/9/enacted.

[27] *Wightman*, Case C-621/18, paras. 56–59 and 73–75.

[28] *Wightman*, Case C-621/18, paras. 73–75; European Union, *Treaty on European Union*, arts. 49, 50(3), and 50(5).

[29] European Union and United Kingdom, *Agreement on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community*, *Official Journal of the European Union* L 29 (January 31, 2020), arts. 126–127, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12020W/TXT.

[30] *Withdrawal Agreement*, art. 4 and pt. 2.

Article 70 VCLT generally releases parties from further treaty performance following termination while preserving rights, obligations, and legal situations previously created through the treaty's execution, unless otherwise provided. Yet it does not perpetuate every EU membership obligation automatically; Article 43 also preserves obligations independently binding under international law.[31] Post-Brexit commitments must therefore be differentiated into three categories: rights or legal situations established before withdrawal and assessed under relevant treaty rules; specific obligations preserved or created by the *Withdrawal Agreement*, including citizens' rights and financial settlement; and new obligations arising under subsequent instruments such as the TCA. Identifying each obligation's legal source prevents the mistaken assumption that post-withdrawal rules either disappeared entirely or survived wholesale.

The domestic legal framework likewise requires differentiation. The *European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018* retained categories of EU-derived rules within UK law; the *Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023* subsequently changed aspects of that framework, including the designation *assimilated law*.[32] Such rules may continue because Parliament retained them, not because EU membership persists. By contrast, Section 7A of the 2018 Act, inserted by the *European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020*, gives domestic effect to rights and obligations arising under the *Withdrawal Agreement*. In conjunction with Article 4 of that Agreement, it can require courts to disapply conflicting domestic provisions where stipulated.[33] Brexit therefore separates the UK's legislative retention of former EU rules from its implementation of continuing international commitments.

After transition, the *Trade and Cooperation Agreement* (TCA) provided a distinct legal basis for UK–EU trade and cooperation without restoring EU membership. Article 4 directs interpretation according to international law, including principles codified in the VCLT. Article 5 generally excludes direct domestic enforceability by individuals, subject

[31] *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, arts. 43 and 70(1)–(2); *Withdrawal Agreement*, pts. 2 and 5.

[32] *European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018*, c. 16, secs. 2–4 (UK), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/16/contents; *Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023*, c. 28, secs. 1–5 (UK), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/28/contents.

[33] *European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018*, sec. 7A, as inserted by *European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020*, c. 1, sec. 5 (UK), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/16/section/7A; *Withdrawal Agreement*, art. 4.

to specified exceptions.[34] This differs from Article 4 of the *Withdrawal Agreement*, which expressly secures certain legal effects and individual reliance. The contrast matters for sovereignty: the United Kingdom gained greater authority over domestic regulation, but post-Brexit cooperation still depends on binding international undertakings. The existence of treaty obligations is not equivalent to the continuation of the EU's former general supranational authority over the United Kingdom.

Brexit also produced territorially differentiated legal arrangements. The *Windsor Framework*, modifying the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, maintains the application of specified EU rules in Northern Ireland, particularly concerning goods and customs, alongside oversight arrangements and democratic-consent mechanisms.[35] These provisions seek to facilitate cross-border commerce and avoid a hard border with the Republic of Ireland while protecting the relevant markets. Their limited territorial and substantive scope should not be conflated with the continued application of EU law throughout the United Kingdom. Instead, they demonstrate how international commitments can qualify the exercise of domestic regulatory powers in a particular territory even after national withdrawal from the organization.

Taken together, Brexit reveals three dimensions of sovereignty. First, the United Kingdom retained authority to determine whether to continue its membership in the European Union. Second, the exercise of that authority required compliance with domestic constitutional rules and the withdrawal procedure agreed under Article 50 TEU. Third, withdrawal expanded national discretion in certain fields without extinguishing accrued legal situations, obligations preserved by the *Withdrawal Agreement*, or new treaty commitments under the TCA. These distinctions support understanding Brexit as a transformation in the exercise of sovereignty rather than the recovery of sovereignty previously lost. Formal legal autonomy increased in some areas, but the

[34] European Union and United Kingdom, *Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, of the One Part, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, of the Other Part*, *Official Journal of the European Union* L 149 (April 30, 2021), arts. 4–5, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22021A0430(01).

[35] EU–UK Joint Committee, "Decision No. 1/2023 of 24 March 2023 Laying Down Arrangements Relating to the Windsor Framework," *Official Journal of the European Union* L 102 (April 17, 2023), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22023D0819; European Commission, "Windsor Framework," accessed November 20, 2026, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/relations-united-kingdom/eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/windsor-framework_en.

scope and practical effects of national decisions remain shaped by specific international obligations.

Political, Economic, and Social Implications of Brexit for the United Kingdom and the European Union

Politically, Brexit transformed UK–EU relations from membership-based decision-making into external cooperation, prompting institutional adjustments within the Union.[36] The United Kingdom lost participation as a Member State in the European Council and Council of the European Union, while its citizens ceased to have UK representation in the European Parliament. Following withdrawal, the UK's 73 parliamentary seats were removed: 27 were redistributed to remaining Member States and 46 held in reserve.[37] This altered representation within the Union and increased the UK's independent policymaking space, but ended its direct vote in EU institutions. The implications cannot be reduced to an unconditional gain or loss of sovereignty: institutional authority changed alongside the mechanisms available for influencing neighbouring states.

Brexit also intensified constitutional tensions within the United Kingdom. In the 2016 referendum, 62% of voters in Scotland and 55.8% in Northern Ireland supported remaining in the EU, despite the overall Leave result.[38] Scotland's constitutional debate consequently developed alongside Northern Ireland's distinctive cross-border problems. Under the *Windsor Framework*, certain EU goods rules continue to apply in Northern Ireland. On 10 December 2024, its Assembly voted 48–36 to continue Articles 5–10, but the absence of cross-community support triggered an independent review.[39] These developments expose differences between nationwide withdrawal authority and territorial political consent. They also show how maintaining an open land border with Ireland can require differentiated legal arrangements and contested forms of democratic accountability.

For the EU, Brexit prompted adjustments in parliamentary representation, Council relationships, and coordination among Member States rather

[36] Bressanelli and Chelotti, "Assessing What Brexit Means for Europe."

[37] European Parliament, "Redistribution of Seats in the European Parliament after Brexit," January 31, 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200130IPR71407/redistribution-of-seats-in-the-european-parliament-after-brexit.

[38] Elise Uberoi, *Analysis of the EU Referendum Results 2016*, Research Briefing CBP-7639 (House of Commons Library, June 29, 2016), https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7639/.

[39] Northern Ireland Assembly, "Democratic Consent Mechanism," accessed November 20, 2026, https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/brexit-and-beyond/democratic-consent-mechanism/.

than institutional collapse.[40] Yet the United Kingdom's withdrawal did not end strategic interdependence. At the summit of 19 May 2025, both parties agreed a renewed strategic partnership encompassing security and defence as well as an agenda for economic and social cooperation.[41] Their joint statement of 20 November 2026 reaffirmed cooperation and the implementation of existing agreements.[42] These developments should not be conflated with restoration of membership or automatic entry into force of newly negotiated measures: political commitments require distinct legal steps. Thus, the EU preserved its internal institutional framework while the UK pursued influence through diplomacy and negotiated arrangements rather than membership rights.

Economically, leaving the single market and customs union introduced customs formalities, rules-of-origin requirements, and regulatory compliance costs. The TCA allows zero tariffs and quotas for qualifying goods but does not reproduce frictionless single-market access.[43] Nevertheless, economic connections remained substantial: in 2025 UK exports of goods and services to the EU totalled £384 billion, accounting for 41% of UK exports, while imports from the EU reached £472 billion, or 50% of imports.[44] These figures indicate continuing interdependence, not the causal economic benefit or cost of Brexit. The distinction is critical: greater legal discretion over trade policy coexists with reliance on the EU market and the practical costs of trading across separate regulatory jurisdictions.

The effects also differed across sectors. UK goods exports to the EU in 2025 were 14% below their 2019 level in real terms, versus an 8% decline to non-EU markets, while services exports to the EU were 28% higher. Comparisons require caution because changes in goods-trade statistics introduced a structural break in January 2021, and the pandemic and global disruptions affected the same period.[45] Separately, the Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that long-run UK imports and exports will

[40] Bressanelli and Chelotti, "Assessing What Brexit Means for Europe."

[41] Council of the European Union, "EU–UK Summit," May 19, 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/05/19/.

[42] UK Government, "UK–EU Summit 2026 Joint Statement," November 20, 2026, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukeu-summit-2026-key-documents/uk-eu-summit-2026-joint-statement-html.

[43] *Trade and Cooperation Agreement*, pt. 2, heading 1, title 1, chs. 1–2; European Commission, "EU Trade Relations with the United Kingdom."

[44] Ward and Webb, *Statistics on UK–EU Trade*.

[45] Ward and Webb, *Statistics on UK–EU Trade*, sections "Trade Affected by Brexit and Other Factors," "Little Growth in Goods Exports," and "Services Have Performed Better."

each be approximately 15% below a continued-membership counterfactual, reducing potential productivity by about 4%.[46] These projections are model-based estimates, not measured losses attributable solely to Brexit. Sectoral variation and methodological limits therefore preclude treating every post-2019 movement as a direct effect of withdrawal.

For the EU, the United Kingdom became an external trading partner while remaining economically significant. Eurostat recorded EU goods exports to the UK of €345.3 billion and imports of €158.7 billion in 2025, a surplus of €186.6 billion; the UK accounted for 13.1% of extra-EU goods exports and 6.3% of imports.[47] Financial services reveal another adjustment: in December 2020, nearly 80% of euro-area clearing participants' over-the-counter derivative positions were cleared through UK-based counterparties, leading EU authorities to seek reduced dependence.[48] However, shifting market activity takes time and reflects commercial as well as regulatory decisions. Both cases illustrate how changed legal boundaries coexist with persistent economic interdependence and asymmetric adjustment costs.

Socially, ending free movement after 31 December 2020 altered the rights of EU citizens seeking to live or work in the United Kingdom and UK citizens moving to EU Member States. Part Two of the *Withdrawal Agreement* nevertheless preserves specified residence and employment rights for eligible persons.[49] In the United Kingdom, the *EU Settlement Scheme* grants qualifying residents *settled* or *pre-settled status*. The Home Office reported nearly 4.6 million grants of settled status by 30 June 2026, but these administrative decisions cannot be equated with unique residents because they include repeat applications and status conversions.[50] Brexit thus changed the legal mechanism for exercising and evidencing individual rights, rather than simply

[46] Office for Budget Responsibility, "Brexit Analysis."
[47] Eurostat, "EU Trade in Goods with the United Kingdom in 2015–2025," June 22, 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20260622-1.
[48] Oana Furtuna et al., "The Derivatives Clearing Landscape in the Euro Area Three Years after Brexit," in *Financial Integration and Structure in the Euro Area 2024* (European Central Bank, 2024), https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/fie/box/html/ecb.fiebox202406_02.en.html.
[49] *Withdrawal Agreement*, pt. 2; European Commission, "Citizens' Rights."
[50] Home Office, "How Many Indefinite Leave (Settlement and EUSS Settled Status) Grants Have Been Issued in the UK?," *Immigration System Statistics, Year Ending June 2026*, August 27, 2026, secs. 3.1 and 4, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2026/how-many-indefinite-leave-settlement-and-euss-settled-status-grants-have-been-issued-in-the-uk.

extinguishing protections for everyone previously covered by free movement.

UK nationals living in EU Member States also retain protections where they meet the *Withdrawal Agreement* conditions. Implementation varies between declaratory and constitutive residence-status systems, generating different administrative requirements across Member States.[51] Migration patterns changed alongside these legal arrangements. For the year ending December 2025, the Office for National Statistics estimated UK net migration at 171,000 and net migration among EU+ nationals at −42,000; EU+ includes EU, Icelandic, Liechtenstein, Norwegian, and Swiss nationals.[52] This measure is not identical to EU citizenship alone. Moreover, migration trends reflect subsequent UK immigration policies, economic conditions, and statistical revisions; neither the decline in European inflows nor changes in overall migration can be attributed exclusively to Brexit.

Labour-market and education data reveal further differentiated effects. The Migration Observatory reported that UK payrolled employment among EU nationals in late 2024 was approximately 13% below its November 2019 peak, with particularly pronounced declines in hospitality and administrative services. Around 28,000 EU-domiciled students enrolled on new UK higher-education courses in 2024/25, compared with approximately 67,000 in the final academic year under free movement.[53] Changes in visa requirements, tuition-fee eligibility, and the COVID-19 pandemic complicate causal attribution. Nevertheless, these trends demonstrate how altered legal conditions can interact with individual decisions, employment opportunities, and access to education. Social consequences therefore concern both formal rights and the practical feasibility of cross-border participation.

Cooperation has not ceased. At the summit on 20 November 2026, the UK and EU welcomed the conclusion of negotiations on a *Youth Experience Scheme* envisaging up to 100,000 participants from each

[51] European Commission, "Citizens' Rights," section "UK Nationals Living in the EU."

[52] Office for National Statistics, "Long-Term International Migration, Provisional: Year Ending December 2025," May 21, 2026, sections "Long-Term Net Migration" and "Net Migration by Nationality," https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingdecember2025.

[53] Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, "EU Migration to and from the UK," January 22, 2026, sections "How Many EU Nationals Work in the UK?" and "How Many EU Nationals Study in the UK?," https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/eu-migration-to-and-from-the-uk/.

side annually, with stays of up to three years for work, study, volunteering, and travel. The scheme's negotiated terms should not be mistaken for immediate legal operation or restoration of general free movement.[54] Overall, Brexit increased UK discretion in some policy fields but removed direct EU institutional participation, introduced trade frictions despite enduring market ties, and altered migration rights while preserving targeted protections. These outcomes distinguish formal legal authority from practical capacity: withdrawal reorganized political, economic, and social interdependence rather than eliminating it.

CONCLUSION

Brexit demonstrates that withdrawal from an international organization constitutes an exercise of state sovereignty, although its implementation remains subject to domestic constitutional requirements and international legal procedures. Article 50 TEU provides the specific legal framework for the United Kingdom's withdrawal, consistent with the general principles of treaty law under the VCLT. The *Miller* and *Wightman* judgments further demonstrate that the exercise of sovereign authority must comply with applicable legal requirements. Although Brexit expanded the United Kingdom's autonomy in certain policy areas, it did not extinguish existing international obligations or prevent the establishment of new commitments. Rather than restoring sovereignty that had previously been lost, Brexit transformed the manner in which sovereign authority is exercised. Politically, the United Kingdom gained greater autonomy in national policymaking but lost its direct participation in EU decision-making. Economically, withdrawal introduced new trade barriers while substantial commercial interdependence persisted. Socially, the termination of freedom of movement altered migration arrangements and citizens' legal status, although certain rights remain protected under the *Withdrawal Agreement*. These findings demonstrate that greater legal autonomy does not necessarily translate into greater practical independence, as international legal obligations and political, economic, and social interdependence continue to shape relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union.

[54] UK Government, "UK–EU Summit 2026 Joint Statement," para. 39; UK Government, "UK–EU Summit 2026 Explainer Youth Experience Scheme," November 20, 2026, section "Overview," https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukeu-summit-2026-key-documents/uk-eu-summit-2026-explainer-youth-experience-scheme-html.

REFERENCES

Bressanelli, Edoardo, and Nicola Chelotti. "Assessing What Brexit Means for Europe: Implications for EU Institutions and Actors." *Politics and Governance* 9, no. 1 (2021): 1–4. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i1.3982.

Council of the European Union. "EU–UK Summit." May 19, 2025. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/05/19/.

Council of the European Union. "EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement." Accessed November 20, 2026. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/the-eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/.

Daly, Eoin. "Popular Sovereignty after Brexit." *German Law Journal* 23, no. 1 (2022): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2022.3.

Electoral Commission. *The 2016 EU Referendum: Report on the 23 June 2016 Referendum on the UK's Membership of the European Union*. September 2016. https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/2016-EU-referendum-report.pdf.

European Commission. "Citizens' Rights." Accessed November 20, 2026. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/relations-united-kingdom/eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/citizens-rights-0_en.

European Commission. "EU Trade Relations with the United Kingdom." Accessed November 20, 2026. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/united-kingdom_en.

European Commission. "Windsor Framework." Accessed November 20, 2026. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/relations-united-kingdom/eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/windsor-framework_en.

European Parliament. "Redistribution of Seats in the European Parliament after Brexit." January 31, 2020. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200130IPR71407/redistribution-of-seats-in-the-european-parliament-after-brexit.

European Union. *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*. *Official Journal of the European Union* C 202 (June 7, 2016). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12016M050.

European Union and United Kingdom. *Agreement on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community*. *Official Journal of the European Union* L 29 (January 31, 2020). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12020W/TXT.

European Union and United Kingdom. *Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, of the One Part, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, of the Other Part*. *Official Journal of the European Union* L 149 (April 30, 2021). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22021A0430(01).

Eurostat. "EU Trade in Goods with the United Kingdom in 2015–2025." June 22, 2026. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20260622-1.

Furtuna, Oana, Susanne Kretschmann, and Francesco Vacirca. "The Derivatives Clearing Landscape in the Euro Area Three Years after Brexit." In *Financial Integration and Structure in the Euro Area 2024*. European Central Bank, 2024. https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/fie/box/html/ecb.fiebox202406_02.en.html.

Ganderson, Joseph, Niccolò Donati, Maurizio Ferrera, Anna Kyriazi, and Zbigniew Truchlewski. "A Very European Way Out: Polity Maintenance and the Design of Article 50." *Government and Opposition* 60, no. 1 (2025): 207–28. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2023.44.

Home Office. "How Many Indefinite Leave (Settlement and EUSS Settled Status) Grants Have Been Issued in the UK?" *Immigration System Statistics, Year Ending June 2026*. August 27, 2026. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2026/how-many-indefinite-leave-settlement-and-euss-settled-status-grants-have-been-issued-in-the-uk.

Joint Committee Established by the EU–UK Withdrawal Agreement. "Decision No. 1/2023 of 24 March 2023 Laying Down Arrangements Relating to the Windsor Framework." *Official Journal of the European Union* L 102 (April 17, 2023). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22023D0819.

McEwen, Nicola, and Mary C. Murphy. "Brexit and the Union: Territorial Voice, Exit and Re-entry Strategies in Scotland and Northern

Ireland after EU Exit." *International Political Science Review* 43, no. 3 (2022): 374–89. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512121990543.

Migration Observatory, University of Oxford. "EU Migration to and from the UK." January 22, 2026. https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/eu-migration-to-and-from-the-uk/.

Northern Ireland Assembly. "Democratic Consent Mechanism." Accessed November 20, 2026. https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/brexit-and-beyond/democratic-consent-mechanism/.

Office for Budget Responsibility. "Brexit Analysis." Accessed November 20, 2026. https://obr.uk/forecasts-in-depth/the-economy-forecast/brexit-analysis/.

Office for National Statistics. "Long-Term International Migration, Provisional: Year Ending December 2025." May 21, 2026. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingdecember2025.

Peers, Steve. "The End—or a New Beginning? The EU/UK Withdrawal Agreement." *Yearbook of European Law* 39 (2020): 122–98. https://doi.org/10.1093/yel/yeaa010.

R (on the Application of Miller and Another) v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. [2017] UKSC 5. January 24, 2017. https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2016-0196.

Uberoi, Elise. *Analysis of the EU Referendum Results 2016*. Research Briefing CBP-7639. House of Commons Library, June 29, 2016. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7639/.

UK Government. "Prime Minister's Letter to Donald Tusk Triggering Article 50." March 29, 2017. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prime-ministers-letter-to-donald-tusk-triggering-article-50.

UK Government. "UK–EU Summit 2026 Explainer Youth Experience Scheme." November 20, 2026. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukeu-summit-2026-key-documents/uk-eu-summit-2026-explainer-youth-experience-scheme-html.

UK Government. "UK–EU Summit 2026 Joint Statement." November 20, 2026. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukeu-summit-2026-key-documents/uk-eu-summit-2026-joint-statement-html.

United Kingdom. *European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017*, c. 9. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/9/enacted.

United Kingdom. *European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018*, c. 16. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/16/contents.

United Kingdom. *European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020*, c. 1. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2020/1/contents.

United Kingdom. *Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023*, c. 28. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/28/contents.

Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. May 23, 1969. 1155 U.N.T.S. 331. https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf.

Ward, Matthew, and Dominic Webb. *Statistics on UK–EU Trade*. Research Briefing CBP-7851. House of Commons Library, June 12, 2026. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7851/.

Wightman and Others v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. Case C-621/18, ECLI:EU:C:2018:999. Court of Justice of the European Union, December 10, 2018. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:62018CJ0621.