Brexit, the War in Ukraine and the Explanatory Power of Liberal Intergovernmentalism and Postfunctionalism

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Abstract

This paper attempts to provide a fresh examination of some of the assumptions that underpin two theories explaining the processes of European integration – liberal intergovernmentalism and postfunctionalism – in the context of two major crises that the European Union (EU) has had to contend with over the course of the last 10 years – the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU and the Ukrainian crisis, which in February 2022 escalated into a full-blown Russian invasion of Ukraine. It demonstrates how 1) liberal intergovernmentalism, particularly with regard to the domestic preferences formation stage and some critiques notwithstanding, is highly relevant in explaining the developments surrounding the decision to hold a referendum on the UK's continued future in the European Union, 2) postfunctionalism then takes up the baton in accounting for the main reasons behind the pro-"Leave" result of the 2016 referendum, which eventually resulted in the country's formal withdrawal from the EU on 31 January 2020, 3) the war in Ukraine has in both an indirect and direct fashion brought about a change (that has the potential to turn out to be a fundamental one) in the post-Brexit relations between the EU and the UK, which once again can at least partially be explained by drawing on both of the abovementioned theories of European integration.

Keywords: European integration, liberal intergovernmentalism, postfunctionalism, United Kingdom, European Union, Brexit, Ukraine, Russia
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Introduction

Over the course of more than a decade the European Union has been forced to deal with a variety of crises, which have had economic, social, political, and security dimensions. Accordingly, the EU has sometimes been described as living in an "age of permacrisis" (Hyde-Price, 2025).

One such crisis concerned the possible withdrawal of the UK from the EU, which essentially became a foregone conclusion after British voters voted, albeit by a narrow margin, in favour of leaving the EU (dubbed as Brexit, which became the Collins English Dictionary word of the year) as part of a referendum held on 23 June 2016. Returning to the precise explanatory factors pertaining to Brexit is always bound to remain a worthy academic endeavour given the milestone nature of the event from the standpoint of European integration studies (the UK is so far the only state to have invoked Article 50 and formally ended its EU membership) and the lessons that can be drawn in terms of the possibility for anticipating and preventing similar scenarios for other European countries.

Another major crisis, the origins of which are not necessarily too closely intertwined with certain EU-level policies and the nature of the institutional characteristics of the EU, emerged following Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022. It upended European security, increasing the perceptions of vulnerability within the EU, and perhaps most notably called into the question the hitherto cautious optimism that the EU and its immediate neighbourhood were destined to virtually forever remain zones of tranquillity. The EU's new Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, which was published in March 2022, clearly identified Russia's actions in Ukraine as posing major threats to both the European security order as a whole and the safety of the citizens of the various EU member countries (Bosse, 2023).

Given the multifaceted nature of Brexit, no single theory of European integration can stake a legitimate claim for being a clear frontrunner in terms of its explanatory value when it comes to accounting for this phenomenon. However, I argue that two such theories, if utilized with conjunction with each other and with a specified "division of labour" between them, are actually able to paint a rather comprehensive picture with regard to the culmination of relevant factors that ultimately resulted in the UK's unexpected departure from the EU. By jointly employing liberal intergovernmentalism (LI) (with a specific focus on the domestic preferences formation stage) and postfunctionalism, the article turns back the clock to then UK Prime Minister David Cameron's fateful 2013 decision to promise a referendum on the UK's EU membership as well as to the political climate in 2016, which played a part in shaping the British citizens' attitudes towards the EU, contributing to the "Leave" campaign's surprising victory in the referendum.

Subsequently, the paper illustrates how the Ukrainian crisis may actually be in the process of becoming a watershed moment with regard to setting a new tone to the relationship between the EU and the United Kingdom, with this changing dynamic once again very much consistent with a number of developments that fit neatly with certain

premises associated with LI and postfunctionalism. More concretely, by examining the increase in the identification with Europe among ordinary EU citizens and the corresponding support for a more assertive EU in the security sphere, trends that Britain has not shied away from, I posit (albeit with a degree of caution) that if the EU-UK realignment turns out to be a permanent one and in the long-term paves the way for a re-accession of the UK to the EU, then this may challenge the conventional wisdom that post-functionalism is necessarily a more "pessimistic" theory of European integration (Webber, 2019) compared to its counterparts.

This article utilizes qualitative methodologies and remains wedded to the unobtrusive research method, which has the advantage of avoiding the Hawthorne effect as well as certain ethical dilemmas and personal biases with regard to the process of obtaining information directly from research participants (Benton and French, 2024). Initially, the paper re-examines the main features of the two principal theoretical approaches that were mentioned above, conducting an integrative literature review, which in itself constitutes the primary methodological tool that is employed (Snyder, 2019). Subsequently, it draws on contemporary academic studies, opinion polls, and situation reports, combining the findings from all of these sources in a systematic fashion and aiming to expand on the theoretical framework. The theory and the data are in a constant state of feedback with each other, (Alfoldi and Sinkovics, 2012) with my own appraisal as to when a saturation point has been reached determining at what stage the data collection process will be discontinued (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

One of the overarching aims is to make a valuable contribution to the wider political science, sociology, and European studies literature, specifically by shedding light on the post-Brexit developments in the period since 2022, which saw the launching of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine, increased the appeal of the EU across a multitude of different sovereign states, and also paved the way for more amicable relations between the EU and the UK. In order to rectify some of the article's possible limitations, which concern the difficulties of measuring the precise transformations pertaining to the post-Brexit endogenous Europeanization dynamics within Britain and the possibility of overestimating the long-term practical effects of the rapprochement between the UK and the EU, it may be worth conducting follow-up research that could entail the administering of semi-structured interviews in the UK that may help elucidate the true degree to which ordinary British people's perceptions of European identity have changed for the better in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of its neighbouring country.

Literature review: main features of liberal intergovernmentalism and postfunctionalism

Liberal internationalism (LI), which is frequently depicted as warranting the status of a "baseline theory" of European integration (Naurin, 2018), assumes that the EU member states place a premium on retaining their sovereignty and are the critical actors who remain

in charge of the integration-related processes (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019), but are willing to delegate a modest amount of that sovereignty to the institutions at the EU level, as long as it is in their best interests and "greases the wheels" when it comes to enabling effective cooperation between them (Hooghe and Marks, 2019). Thus, integration largely occurs (or may fail to materialize) as a result of intergovernmental bargaining between the different countries. Even though LI emphasizes the essential role played by sovereign states, exhibiting much more pronounced similarities to political realism relative to neofunctionalism, another very influential theory of European integration, unlike the realists, it refuses to treat states as "billiard balls" or "black boxes". By incorporating both realist and neo-liberal considerations (Akilatan, 2020), it instead delves into the domestic political landscape in order to explain how the states' preference formation is developed courtesy of the competition between different national groups. From a LI standpoint, rational individuals and private groups with autonomous and differentiated interests can be considered to be among the fundamental actors in international politics (Kleine and Pollack, 2018). Thus, the national governments are more or less aggregators when it comes to a process during which various national interest groups that often prioritize economic considerations compete for political influence. As governments are primarily interested in keeping themselves in office (Hooghe and Marks, 2019), they often need the support of a sufficiently broad coalition of domestic actors in order to achieve that purpose (Brand et al., 2022).

An even more recent addition to the family of European integration theories relative to LI (Leuffen et al., 2022), postfunctionalism recognizes the role played by economic interests when it comes to European integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2019), but seeks to expose the inherent limitations of any attempts to understand the deepening of integration as an exclusively elite-driven and efficiency-maximizing process. It instead invites identity-related factors to enter the fray, focusing on the disruptive and often conflictual effects that accompany the EU integration processes' increased politicization and polarization (Hooghe and Marks 2019; Brand et al., 2022). Essentially, European integration, to a large extent attributable to non-economic reasons, is assumed to have at a certain point in time become fully embedded in the democratic mass politics of states (Kuhn, 2019), contributing to the emergence of a new cultural cleavage between pro-and anti-EU forces (Börzel, 2023), with one of the implications being that citizens are no longer largely neutral or ambivalent when it comes to EU policies (Kuhn, 2019). In particular, the citizens holding exclusive national identities who also have a predilection to be attentive to political developments at the EU level may be successfully mobilized by certain national parties (often considered to be more influential than governments) to oppose the functional pressures for EU-level cooperation between countries (Leuffen et al., 2022).

In essence, while supranational institutionalization can remain attractive if it continues to be perceived as the best way to solve transnational problems (Hooghe and Marks, 2019), the EU, depending on the nature of the citizens' identities and the area in which further erosion with regard to the exclusive competences of nation-states is about to occur, may

be seen as incompatible with their desire for self-rule or even their general belief systems. Thus, the identity considerations of citizens may strongly affect the speed and direction of European integration (Kuhn, 2019). Postfunctionalism also pays special attention to the arena in which an issue is debated because it is likely to affect the nature of political contests. Mass politics during elections, referendums, and party primaries are important windows of opportunity for increasing the salience of national identities, leading to Eurosceptic attitudes coming to the fore (Börzel, 2023), which can become stumbling blocks with regard to integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2019) due to leaving national governments and EU institutions with a reduced space when it comes to political manoeuvring (Börzel, 2023).

Liberal intergovernmentalism and the lead-up to Brexit

Liberal intergovernmentalist explanations when it comes to Brexit have come under heavy scrutiny, in part due to the theory's leading proponent, Andrew Moravcsik, previously characterizing the decision to hold the EU membership vote as an example of symbolic politics, predicting in April 2016 that "under no circumstances will Britain leave Europe, regardless of the result of the referendum on June 23" (Moravcsik, 2016). In 2018, he still argued that the UK's relations with the EU would not change in any significant fashion, the pro-"Leave" win notwithstanding. However, the negotiations between Britain and the EU eventually culminated in a minimalist agreement, resulting in the almost full renunciation of all EU rules, except in the case of Northern Ireland, as spelt out in the Northern Ireland Protocol, which sets out Northern Ireland's post-Brexit relationship with both the EU and the rest of the UK (Schimmelfennig, 2022). Even though at a first glance it appears as if liberal intergovernmentalism may not be the most promising theory in terms of its explanatory power in relation to the UK's departure from the EU, a closer examination of the domestic preference formation stage of the conventional LI model looks likely to yield valuable insights.

When it came to embarking upon the path to Brexit, the ball started rolling when the then Prime Minister of the UK David Cameron publicly made a promise in January 2013 to hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union if the Conservatives won the next general election (Bale, 2022). Cameron largely chose to commit to a vote on his country's EU future not because the UK's population as a whole was clamouring for one, which would be in accordance with postfunctionalist assumptions, but due to a significant number of his own MPs pressuring him to do so for a variety of reasons – some because they were fearful that the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) could steal their thunder at the next election (König, 2017), others due to genuinely wanting their country to leave the EU (Bale, 2022). As early as October 2011 Cameron had already had to quell 22 rebellions concerning Europe, with the involvement of 60 backbenchers from his party (Law, 2021). In the opinion of Nick Clegg who was leader of the Liberal Democrats and Deputy Prime Minister at the time, Cameron needed a mechanism to get a handle on an issue that was destabilizing his party from within (Clegg, 2016). Similarly, according to Craig

Oliver, Cameron's director of communications, the insistence from many Conservative MPs that a referendum take place was so strong that, if Cameron had failed to indulge them, the Conservatives may have decided to choose a new leader (Law, 2021). As mentioned in the section dealing with the core assumptions of liberal intergovernmentalism, the main aim of the government (considered to be the agent in a principal-agent model) is to remain in power, which in the case of democratic countries is contingent on the support of a vast array of principals such as domestic voters, parties, interest groups, and bureaucracies (Moravcsik, 1993). In many respects, the UK Conservative Party could be considered to fit the definition of a catch-all or a big tent party, having politicians with a broad spectrum of ideological viewpoints within its ranks, and its interests did not render themselves to easily being aggregated (Hayton, 2021). Being fully cognizant of these intra-party divisions and still convinced that the "Remain" side would secure the win, Cameron was thus willing to forego some measure of control, taking the chance on a referendum. He was also notably cautious not to engender a strong split within the Conservative party during the campaigning in the months prior to 23 June 2016, offering only tame criticism of the Tories who were advocating for a "Leave" vote (Bale, 2022).

Admittedly, the pragmatic political survival considerations aside, in the early 2010s Cameron also had some trepidations that Britain was in danger of losing ground to an integrationist core of Eurozone countries whose interests prioritized the single currency rather than the single market, and who also appeared to have then German chancellor Angela Merkel on their side, so he was definitely highly motivated to recalibrate the UK's relationship with the EU (Law, 2021). In attempting to stabilize the economy after the Euro area crisis, the EU opted for austerity, which resulted in significant problems for countries such as Greece and Italy, but also delayed economic recovery in Britain (Clarke et al., 2017). In relation to economic considerations, liberal intergovernmentalists stress that the aggregation of integration preferences often reflects the distribution of economic gains among business groups (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). British business was far from united in its efforts to support "Remain" in the period preceding the referendum, in marked contrast to the 1975 United Kingdom European Communities membership referendum (Feldmann and Morgan, 2021). In the 2010s there had been an increase in tensions across a number of spheres between the EU and British businesses when it came to aspects concerning the liberalization of markets and EU regulations (Ibid). Many individual businesses that gravitated towards the "Remain" camp were actually reluctant to make their presence known. For instance, big car producers with acute concerns about a potential Brexit, such as Nissan in Sunderland, chose not to take a strong public stance on the matter (Ibid). Practically all business entities conducted themselves much more cautiously than they had done in 1975, settling for the signing of letters, making brief press statements, and the issuing of reports, in case they were willing to go public with their views at all (Ibid).

Thus, with regard to the events leading up to Brexit, in line with two important LI premises, we had a situation of a political figure believing himself to be quite vulnerable unless he could placate certain members of his own party when it came to the issue of

Europe, which meant that an adoption of a strongly pro-integrationist tone did not seem like a viable course of action. At the same time, prior to the actual Brexit vote taking place, business groups in the UK did not appear to be almost uniformly rooting for one option over the other, with a lack of consensus as to the degree to which the EU could be considered a useful ally in terms of dealing with globalization challenges (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019), making their preferences difficult to aggregate, which meant that Cameron did not necessarily feel as if he was going against the economic grain (and potentially opening himself up to vitriolic criticism by influential economic lobbies) by taking a gamble on a referendum.

Postfunctionalism and UK's decision to leave the EU

As argued previously, the political dynamics that set in motion the process of leaving the EU were very much consistent with LI tenets concerning national-level public officials' appraisals of the preferences of certain domestic groups. However, when it comes to making sense of the actual result of referendum, postfunctionalism needs to step onto the scene. Cameron's announcement of the referendum actually contributed to propelling the issue of Europe (which before that had been just one of many facing the UK) into the spotlight, with it essentially becoming an all-consuming one from the standpoint of Conservative Party voters. (Bale, 2022) Plebiscites inevitably increase the levels of politicization of issues and often reinforce certain fault lines existing within societies (Hooghe and Marks, 2009), in part due to attracting prominent media coverage, which is in line with the postfunctionalists' assumption that when ordinary citizens are called to attention on EU issues, this may often trigger disintegrative impulses that do not bode well for the deepening of integration.

Austrian political scientist Markus Gastinger contends that in early 2016 the UK's exit propensity was far higher than any other EU country, not only in accordance with economic indicators, but social and political ones as well (Gastinger, 2019). In particular, the British citizens' weaker sense of European identity in comparison to that of their counterparts from the other European nations has been conducive to the flourishing of Eurosceptic sentiments. As argued by German historian and philosopher Matthias Häußler, when it comes to the writing of history, British constructions of identity since the 1980s have even tended to present the UK as antithetical to Europe as a continent rather than to merely the European Union, with such understandings gradually starting to permeate political discourses (quoted in Vogenauer, 2020).

There is also now a strong consensus among British experts on populism and European politics that the core motives of the voting public were already "baked in" a long time before the referendum was called, with the two strongest drivers of the "Leave" vote being very much connected to identity-related considerations – concerns over a loss of sovereignty and uncontrolled immigration (Clarke et al., 2023). According to British political scientist Matthew Goodwin, Brexit was more about British people's concept of the self and a need to reassert British identity rather than economics, with Goodwin and fellow academic

Caitlin Milazzo finding that, even after accounting for other factors, citizens' disquiet over immigration remained the major predictor with regard to the likelihood of choosing the "Leave" option (Ibid).

Thus, postfunctionalism certainly has plenty to say with regard to accounting for the result of the referendum, though in terms of the members of the mass public getting the chance to cast their lots in a referendum, it was LI assumptions consistent with David Cameron and other prominent Conservative Party members' relatively narrow political interests and indecisive signalling on the part of major interest groups, such as business lobbies, which provided the fertile ground for postfunctionalist factors to take centre stage and bring about a horizontal disintegration of the EU.

The war in Ukraine's overall impacts on the European Union

The Ukrainian crisis, even though it has negatively impacted the EU across multiple domains, is in some respects the "right type of crisis", at least from a legitimacy standpoint. Unlike in the case of previous major challenges it has had to contend with, such as the 2015 European migrant crisis, it is very difficult to sustain the argument that this is a mess of the EU's own making and EU-level actors can remotely be considered to be the primary culprits for the war's escalation. Even though Russian elites have been critical of a number of joint initiatives of the EU, viewing, to take one example, the Eastern Partnership as an attempt to undermine their influence in Eastern Europe (Safaryan, 2024), the Putin regime has preferred to point the finger at NATO expansion and US geopolitical adventurism, generally refraining from assigning blame to the EU. Also, at least in its public pronouncements, the Russian president has been consistent in pointing out that Russia is not opposed to the EU membership of Ukraine (Krupa, 2025).

It is undoubtedly the case that Russia's actions in Ukraine have contributed to a renewed political dynamism within the EU across a number of spheres. One of the unintended consequences of the war in Ukraine has been the revitalization of the previously stalled accession process for the non-EU countries in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, with the European Council granting Ukraine and Moldova the status of EU candidate countries on 24 June 2022, while on the same date also recognizing that Georgia could relatively soon find itself in their company (Fabbrini, 2025), thus putting an end to the "enlargement fatigue" (Börzel, 2023). Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, has lauded the prospects of an enlarged EU as an investment in the block's security (Fabbrini, 2025), echoing the sentiments of political scientist Veronica Anghel that enlargement is now no longer a risk, but actually constitutes a strategic necessity (Anghel, 2024) in terms of the overall security environment in Europe.

There are also indications that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had a rally-round-the-EU effect, with one study, drawing on data collected between February and April 2022, reporting a general increase in support for the EU by 4 percentage points after the beginning of the war (Klüver and Unan, 2024). In a period of heightened geopolitical uncertainty,

even ordinary citizens who are not particularly attached to Europe from a purely emotional standpoint nonetheless seem to cherish the advantages of belonging to a supranational community (Muhammad and Undzėnas, 2025), akin to how elevated security threats have historically been among the linchpins for state-building mobilization (Grosse, 2023). A May 2025 Eurobarometer poll shows that trust in the European Union has reached its highest levels since 2007, with Europeans desiring a stronger and more assertive EU, even if it begins to encroach upon certain spheres that are considered to merit the designation of "high politics" (European Commission, 2025).

The EU's international profile has also arguably been raised due to in many respects demonstrating a capacity to act as a unified actor in relation to Ukraine – i.e. the EU member states have been able to reach unanimous agreements on a multitude of sanctions packages against Russia and offered many different types of support to Ukraine (Bosse, 2023). In addition to the "discursive empowerment" of existing EU institutions, especially the European Commission (Capati, 2025), the war in Ukraine was the catalyst for the creation of the European Political Community (EPC), an intergovernmental forum intended for political and strategic discussions regarding the future of Europe, which provides a further avenue for strengthening relations with both membership candidates such as Ukraine and former member countries like the UK (Fabbrini, 2025). Furthermore, Denmark, which somewhat similarly to the United Kingdom, has often warranted the label of a reluctant member of the EU in terms of its attitude towards the deepening of integration, (Wind, 2016) in a notable reversal of 30 years of Eurosceptic defence policy, voted overwhelmingly in a referendum held on 1 June 2022 in favour of abolishing its opt-out with regard to EU defence cooperation (Murray, 2022).

Liberal intergovernmentalism, the war in Ukraine and the changing EU-UK relations

If we are to move beyond the domestic preferences stage formation, liberal intergovernmentalism views intergovernmental bargaining as one of the main strategies employed by states to secure essential interests, with their decisions to enter a new club (a supranational community) and/or (re)allocate authority to common functional institutions largely attributable to the opportunities provided for resolving cooperation issues or collective action problems to the satisfaction of all parties (Hooghe and Marks, 2019).

The European response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought about a more clear-cut division of tasks between NATO and the EU. Due to the reduced substitutability of organizational frameworks, outsiders – like the post-Brexit United Kingdom – have suddenly found themselves in a more difficult spot than before due to no longer being privy to certain decisions on key strategic matters being taken and having to abandon its coordinating role between NATO and the EU (Martill, 2024). Thus, one of the costs of Brexit, which became apparent during the first year of the war, concerned the weakened ability of both the UK and the EU to shape a strong joint response to President Putin's threats to pan-European security (Blockmans, 2022). In this

regard, some journalists and political commentators, such as Rafael Behr, have lamented that in the post-Brexit era, while still basking in the glory of the "win" achieved over the pro-EU crowd, Britain had been consciously refusing to take into account the potential of the EU as a twin pillar (the other being NATO) of European security (Behr, 2023).

Accordingly, in line with liberal institutionalist logic, the war in Ukraine has highlighted how being outside of the EU club appears to be to the detriment of the UK in terms of its ability to be on top of its game when it comes to finding a solution to a collective action problem, in this case a highly pertinent international security issue.

The United Kingdom has consistently regarded stability in Europe as inseparable from its own national security (Bressy, 2025). Perhaps not too surprisingly, in 2023 the Conservative Party in the UK appeared to markedly shift gears in its discourse on a global Britain, designating Europe as a strategic priority, with the Labour Party, in 2024, following in their footsteps. (Ibid) The UK's attempts to at least partially rectify the issues stemming from its self-exclusion from the EU club have created a momentum for a new type of engagement between Britain and the EU on foreign and security policy. The EU-UK summit in May 2025 offered a coherent framework for deepening the relationship between the two sides, for instance courtesy of the signing of a Security and Defence Partnership, which is intended to pave the way for an active British participation in European defence programmes (Leonard, 2025).

This reset in relations, largely enabled by the vicissitudes of the situation in Ukraine, has garnered approval across the EU. In particular, Labour Party leader Keir Starmer who became Prime Minister of the UK in 2024, has earned plaudits for his diplomatic efforts on Ukraine, which are believed to have played an important part in helping UK regain the trust of the EU institutions and member states, and he has also been credited for filling the leadership vacuum created due to Trump's vacillating stances on Ukraine. Accordingly, the UK has started to be widely viewed in Europe as once again "being part of the team" (Ibid).

The new spirit of European unity notwithstanding, in accordance with (liberal) institutionalist logic the member states have refrained from bestowing additional prerogatives on the EU when it comes to security and defence issues – rather than attempting a centralization of core state powers at the EU level, they have engaged in the joint mobilization of their national armed forces, fiscal resources, and administrative capacities, using EU institutions as facilitators and regulators (Börzel, 2023). This restraint on the part of the pro-integrationist core of member states may have arguably further enhanced the EU's appeal to the viscerally anti-federalist Brits.

Hence, given that the UK now regards a more assertive EU as a crucial partner when it comes to dealing with Russia (Stowers and Wager, 2023), especially given the unpredictability of the foreign policy of the Trump administration, with Lefebvre describing the EU as gradually transforming itself from a liberal power to a hard power, on the cusp of co-belligerence (due to providing weapons to Ukraine) (Lefebvre, 2023), it is hardly a surprise, in accordance with LI assumptions, that a British reinvigoration of its partnership with the EU (though we are of course still far away from any potential re-accession discussions) is once again on the agenda.

Postfunctionalism, the war in Ukraine and the changing EU-UK relations

However, in order for the analysis to reach a level of completeness, postfunctionalism once again needs to make an appearance, as it did in the case of the explanations provided with regard to the success enjoyed by the hard Eurosceptics in the Brexit referendum. While the traditional postfunctionalist analysis deals with disintegration processes, it can also be useful in explaining certain developments that are connected to re-integration (Kovalevska, 2023).

In line with postfunctionalist expectations, the increased sympathy for the idea of a closer cooperation with the EU on the part of ordinary UK citizens can at least in part be traced to some notable changes pertaining to their self-conceptualizations of identity. According to the British Foreign Policy Group's Annual Survey of UK Public Opinion for 2023, UK citizens became more likely to identify as European, more inclined to trust the EU and more appreciative of its importance as a strategic partner relative to that of the United States, compared to the year before Russia's invasion. Interestingly, even a majority (58%) of "Leave" voters acknowledged that the UK should seek to reduce barriers to trade with the EU (Aspinall, 2023). While the British government and the EU have been inching towards closer security cooperation since 2022, though it took until 2025 for Starmer's reset deal with the EU to be announced (Elgot and O'Carroll, 2025), public opinion has actually been ahead of the events on the ground. Even prior to the Labour government's election win, British citizens were quite favourable to the idea of an ambitious restart of relations between the UK and the EU. (Leonard, 2024) According to polls commissioned by academic think tank UK in a Changing Europe, support for the idea of re-entering the ranks of the EU was on the rise throughout 2022, increasing from 49% in favour of re-joining in February to 56% in December (Stowers and Wager, 2023).

In terms of identity considerations in relation to the EU, as identified previously, immigration and the perceived culpability of the EU regarding unsustainable intra-EU migration flows was possibly the preeminent issue when it came to accounting for the decision to vote in favour of Brexit (Clarke et al., 2023). However, since 2021 overall migration to the UK has actually increased due to non-EU migration more than making up for the lower migration from EU countries (Walsh, 2024), with a significant number of British citizens expressing the belief that illegal immigration has risen since the UK's departure from the EU (Stowers and Wager, 2023). Thus, in relation to immigration, the perceived cure (Brexit) has appeared to actually be worse than the problem (the EU), or if one is to be more generous in one's interpretations, Brexit has been far from a panacea with regard to the UK's successful handling of this hot potato issue (and other related ones) (Davey, 2025).

With respect to the identity-related aspects, the improved image of Europe in the minds of British citizens is just one side of the coin. While, as mentioned previously, the Ukraine war has changed certain calculations with regard to the EU's role pertaining to the wider continent's security, Ukraine's struggle to chart its own foreign policy course also resonates emotionally with many segments of British society. Even when narrowing the circle to the

Western countries, the UK has been characterized as a stand-out ally to Ukraine. (Landsman, 2025) For instance, political scientist Catarina Thomson depicts the United Kingdom as one of Ukraine's staunchest supporters (while also praising certain sovereign states in Northern and Eastern Europe) (Nuspliger, 2024). However, unlike many continental European countries, the UK has demonstrated unwavering political unity in relation to Ukraine. No political party (with the now largely marginalized Corbynite faction within the Labour Party constituting a possible exception) (Landsman, 2025) has explicitly called for ending British support for Ukraine (Keate, 2025). Even Nigel Farage's Reform UK, a right-wing populist party that frequently criticizes establishment politics in the UK, has demonstrated restraint in the peddling of overtly pro-Russian rhetoric in relation to Ukraine (Landsman, 2025). In explaining the highly favourable attitudes towards President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his fellow Ukrainians, some analysts have drawn parallels with the history of the Second World War, which remains embedded in British national consciousness. For instance, the Russian aerial strikes on the capital Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities have evoked parallels with the attacks on Britain as part of the Blitz (Nuspliger, 2024). Media personality Rafael Behr aptly describes many British citizens' attitudes towards Ukraine and the EU in the context of the Ukrainians' existential war: "Having turned our backs on the European project, we are half the friend to Ukraine that we could be" (Behr, 2023). The Russian political establishment has done itself no favours in that regard either. Its tendency to single out the UK as a true enemy country of Russia (Giannangeli, 2025), second only to the United States, with prominent pro-regime TV presenters such as Vladimir Solovyov frequently engaging in nuclear sabre-rattling, uttering not so thinly veiled threats of apocalyptic scenarios in relation to Britain, (Cameron, 2024) has only further encouraged British people to close ranks in favour of Ukraine.

Conclusion

Liberal intergovernmentalism and postfunctionalism can work in tandem in explaining the particular motivations behind the road to Brexit and the actual reasons behind the vote going in a certain direction. In a similar fashion, I demonstrated how by being used in combination with each other they can elucidate why the Ukraine war representing a paradigm shift in terms of being a major factor behind the move from bilateralism towards a more structured cooperation between the UK and the EU is not necessarily a totally unexpected development. This new British receptiveness to the EU stems from pragmatic considerations, for example connected to the unexpected obstacles encountered with regard to the pursuit of certain security interests outside the EU framework, consistent with LI expectations, but also reflects important identity-related transformations among the members of the British public, causing them to view the whole process of reengagement with the EU in a more positive light, which once again shows the continued relevance of postfunctionalism. German political scientist Tanja Börzel sums it up best, as in her view, the Ukraine crisis managed to alter certain identity discourses, which conjured up a new

permissive consensus necessary for upgrading a number of common interests between the EU and the UK (Börzel, 2023). In essence, if the new-found impetus injected into the EU-UK relations courtesy of the war in Ukraine brings about a scenario in which a newly Europeanized Britain at some point displays a real desire to re-join the EU, this may cause postfunctionalism to gradually enter the ranks of the "optimistic" theories of European integration because mass politics may actually turn out to be conducive to integration rather than disintegration efforts.

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