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Five Years of Brexit: Lessons, Challenges, and the Way Forward

By

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Introduction

Brexit has been the most consequential political event in modern British history. Five years after the United Kingdom formally left the European Union, its impacts are becoming increasingly clear. While some envisioned a new era of sovereignty and global trade freedom, the reality has been a

complex web of economic hardship, political instability, and bureaucratic hurdles.

Immigration

The dominant issue during the referendum campaign was immigration—take back control! Brexit has reduced immigration from the EU but increased it overall. Services such as the NHS are still understaffed. Asylum seekers continue to arrive in small boats.

Economic Impact: A Costly Mistake

The Brexit Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) is unique in that it reduces trade between the contracting parties. The EU remains the UK's largest trading partner by far. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, Brexit has led to a 4% reduction in the UK's GDP, equating to an annual loss of approximately £100 billion. Trade has suffered dramatically, with UK goods exports falling 11.2% lower than pre-Brexit projections. Many businesses have struggled with increased bureaucracy, disrupted supply chains, and reduced access to EU markets. Instead of the promised economic liberation, Brexit has imposed financial constraints that have made the UK economy less competitive on the global stage.

Political Repercussions:

Searching for Stability Politically, Brexit has forced the UK to redefine its global role. The current government under Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer is working to rebuild diplomatic and economic relations with the EU through trade, security, and energy agreements. However, public sentiment is shifting. Latest polls indicate that 62% would now vote to rejoin, ironically, the percentage by which voters in Scotland voted to remain in the EU in 2016.

Thirty-seven percent of registered voters across the UK as a whole supported Brexit in an advisory referendum. Voters in Northern Ireland (NI) also voted to remain in the EU. No thought had been given to the implications of Brexit for the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (1998), which ended 30 years of conflict in NI. The Agreement is based on EU membership of both the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Boris Johnson's Brexit deal, regarded as a betrayal by NI Unionists, has now (2023) been adjusted in the "Windsor Framework" to reduce to an absolute minimum the paperwork required for goods moving between Great Britain and NI.

The Struggles of UK Citizens in Austria

British nationals residing in Austria have faced significant challenges due to Brexit, including complications with residency, travel, healthcare, and

employment. The Austrian authorities were, however, consistently helpful. Their motto was, "we will not let you down."

Residency and Employment Issues

UK citizens who were living in Austria before January 1, 2021, had to apply for an "Article 50 TEU" residence permit by December 31, 2021. While some exceptions were made, those who missed the deadline or arrived later now face stricter residency requirements, including financial self-sufficiency and German language proficiency. The main impact for those who do have a permit is that they are entitled to work only in Austria because Brexit abolished freedom of movement.

Travel Restrictions

UK nationals are now treated as third-country nationals within the Schengen Area. They can only stay in the EU for 90 days within any 180-day period without a visa. For longer stays, additional permits are required, and stricter border controls have made travel less seamless than before.

Healthcare Complications

Healthcare access for UK citizens in Austria has become more complex. Pensioners who qualify for an S1 form can still access state healthcare, but others must secure private health insurance, which can be expensive. The old European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) is no longer valid for most UK citizens, requiring them to apply for a UK Global Health Insurance Card (GHIC) instead.

United Kingdom Citizens in Austria (UKCA)

United Kingdom Citizens in Austria (UKCA) was an informal association co-founded by Colin Munro, CMG, a former Ambassador to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna.

Established in 2017, UKCA aimed to:

1. Advocate for British citizens in Austria to retain the rights they enjoyed as EU citizens prior to Brexit.
2. Provide insights into Brexit-related political, economic, and social developments in the UK and the EU.

The inaugural meeting of UKCA took place on September 13, 2017, at Café Ministerium in Vienna, introduced by Ambassador Colin Munro and attended by then British Ambassador to Austria, Leigh Turner.

UKCA has collaborated with organizations such as the **Austro-British Society (ABS)** to support British nationals in Austria, especially concerning citizens' rights post-Brexit. For instance, in 2018, Ambassador Leigh Turner

and Colin Munro met with Austrian government officials to discuss citizens' rights.

Comment:

UKCA was indeed important during the negotiations. Colin Munro was able to use his network (including people such as John Kerr and David Hannay) to follow the negotiations in great—and excruciating—detail and explain what was actually going on at our briefing meetings in Café Ministerium. Colin Munro had tremendous support from Alexander Christiani in providing top-level contacts in the Austrian machine. Based on Colin Munro's 39 years' experience as a public servant, it should be noted that the committee was exceptionally efficient and effective.—and much appreciated by Leigh Turner and his staff. But UKCA is dormant. The website is no longer active. Other organisations, such as BIA, BCA, and of course the Embassy, are dealing with the problems that arise for individual citizens. We might reactivate UKCA when, or if, it becomes clearer what the British government is trying to achieve in its "reset." So far, it looks to me like more cakeism. Colin Munro will be in touch with Jane Golding—British in Europe—about this when the paper has been issued.

UKCA was part of the British in Europe (BIE) coalition led by Jane Golding, a Berlin-based British lawyer, which represented the interests of British citizens in the EU in briefing meetings with the European Commission, the British Parliament, British Ministers, and think tanks during the Brexit negotiations that began in 2017. In Austria, UKCA worked with British in Austria (BIA), the British Community Association (BCA), the British Embassy (BE), the delegation of the European Union in Vienna, and of course the Austrian authorities at various levels. BIA, BCA, and BE continue to assist individual UK citizens.

Rebuilding UK-EU Relations: The Path Forward

Looking ahead, there are grounds for cautious optimism. Starting in 2025, the UK and EU will hold annual summits to discuss economic partnerships, security collaboration, and environmental policies. While these efforts aim to repair relations, trust must be rebuilt through pragmatic cooperation.

Brexit was meant to herald a new era of British independence and prosperity. Five years later, it has brought more obstacles than opportunities. The UK must now focus on mitigating the adverse effects of Brexit while fostering stronger ties with the EU to ensure long-term stability.

The organisations mentioned in this Policy Paper will remain committed to promoting the interests of British citizens in Austria and fostering strong ties between the UK and Austria, and indeed the EU as a whole.

The five years since Brexit have revealed its profound impact on the UK and its citizens abroad. Economic losses, political instability, and bureaucratic hurdles have made it clear that Brexit was not the straightforward success

its proponents had envisioned. However, with careful diplomacy and pragmatic policymaking, there is still an opportunity to reshape the UK-EU relationship for the better. Organisations like UKCA and ABS will remain at the forefront of advocating for British citizens and fostering strong ties between the UK and Austria.

The lessons of Brexit must not be ignored. As the UK navigates its post-Brexit reality, it must prioritize collaboration, economic resilience, and diplomatic engagement to mitigate past mistakes and build a more stable future.

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Colin A. Munro is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society and is a UK native. He attended the George Watson's College and the Edinburgh University and joined HM Diplomatic Service in 1969. During his career he held numerous positions in Berlin, Kuala Lumpur, Bucharest, Frankfurt, Zagreb and served as the Private Secretary to the Minister of State responsible for Central and Eastern Europe. His last posting in HM Diplomatic Service was as Ambassador to the OSCE. He chairs the UK Citizens in Austria and in the ABS he is also a member of the Expert Council.