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► **To cite this version:**

Monika Brusenbauch Meislová, Andrew Glencross. Parties. Edward Elgar. Handbook on the European Union and brexit, 56-69, 2023, 9786-1-83910-068-0. hal-04147882

HAL Id: hal-04147882

<https://hal.science/hal-04147882v1>

Submitted on 1 Jul 2023

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2 **Differentiation and power asymmetry**

3 **How Brexit is changing UK relations with Czechia and Slovakia**

4 Monika Brusenbauch Meislová and Andrew Glencross

5 **Abstract**

6 The chapter explores the potential change in power relations wrought by Brexit-
7 related differentiation as the United Kingdom (UK) sought to withdraw from the
8 European Union during the Article 50 negotiations. In particular, it examines and
9 compares two of the UK's bilateral relationships long defined by acute power
10 asymmetry: Czechia and the Slovak Republic. The analysis demonstrates the renewed
11 importance of bilateralism for the UK's engagement with European partners as a
12 consequence of Brexit and shows that the UK sought to make its traditional power
13 asymmetry work to secure its interests in the first phase of Brexit negotiations.

14 **Introduction**

15 In the post-1945 international order, the United Kingdom's (UK's) influence was
16 rooted in its membership of three organizations: NATO, the permanent five of the UN
17 Security Council and the European Union (EU). This presence at the heart of the
18 institutional architecture of multilateral diplomacy – combined with the cultivation of
19 a close relationship with the United States – enabled a succession of British

1 governments to talk up their global influence. Brexit, however, fundamentally altered
2 the UK's strategy for maximizing its power in multilateral settings and also affected
3 perceptions of the UK's relative importance among key bilateral partners. The reason
4 the decision to leave the EU disrupted UK strategy is that the country hitherto
5 practiced, and this was one of the chief reasons for joining the EEC in 1973, a
6 'multipronged European diplomatic strategy' ([Whitman 2016](#)). This consisted of
7 treating EU relations as a subset of its broader international diplomatic strategy for
8 promoting free trade, human rights and a rules-based order. Foreign perceptions have
9 been affected because the UK's partners expected London to be a strong voice within
10 the EU, as in the case of the US which actively encouraged UK integration with
11 European peers.

12 Thus, the puzzle this paper seeks to explore is nested within the context of the
13 changing power dynamics – real and perceived – between the UK and its bilateral
14 partners in Europe. To this end, the analysis explores the potential change in power
15 relations wrought by Brexit-related differentiation as the UK sought to withdraw from
16 the EU during the Article 50 negotiations. In particular, we examine and compare two
17 of the UK's bilateral relationships long defined by acute power asymmetry: Czechia
18 and the Slovak Republic. These played a much less significant role – receiving far
19 less UK media scrutiny in the process – in the Brexit dilemma than the Franco-
20 German axis or the European Commission team led by its chief negotiator Michel
21 Barnier. Yet the largely off-stage nature of their involvement makes Czechia and

1 Slovakia prime test cases for analysing the impact of Brexit on bilateral power
2 relations. This is especially true given the hard bargaining stance adopted by the UK,
3 which sought to test EU unity especially over the most contentious issue of the Brexit
4 talks, the Irish border. As explained in the ‘Introduction’ section, the novelty of the
5 Brexit situation requires a reconsideration of the role power asymmetries play in the
6 process of EU differentiation. The UK’s decision to leave the EU removed the
7 structural veto power member states benefit from instances such as treaty change.
8 This means the process of managing differentiated disintegration, as we conceptualize
9 Brexit, opens up the possibility for recalibrating relationships between the UK and
10 remaining EU countries.

11 UK foreign-policy experts were quick to suggest that Brexit ought to be an
12 opportunity for the UK to reinvigorate its bilateral relationships in Europe (and
13 beyond) ([Major and von Oндarza 2018](#); [Ricketts 2018](#)). However, most analysis has
14 tended to focus on bilateralism with the major EU countries, especially France with
15 which the UK has established ties that fit [Krotz’s \(2010\)](#) definition of ‘regularized
16 intergovernmentalism’. Hence, the novelty of this contribution is to test the effect of
17 Brexit on two central European countries whose bilateral relationships with the UK
18 were long defined by historical asymmetry of power ([Brusenbauch Meislová 2019](#))
19 and for which regularized intergovernmentalism does not apply given the absence of
20 formal institutionalized security or cultural cooperation. An extensive set of
21 interviews was conducted with ministry officials in both countries as well as embassy

1 staff in London, thereby providing a substantial evidence base to analyse UK
2 overtures to both countries and what London hoped to obtain in return (the ‘Power
3 asymmetry and EU differentiation’ section). ‘The UK’s reliance on bilateralism after
4 Brexit: Czechia and Slovakia’ section then considers the changing nature of
5 perceptions of the UK amongst Czech and Slovak decision makers in response to the
6 Brexit negotiations. As discussed in the ‘How the bilateral relationship with the UK is
7 perceived in Czechia and Slovakia’ section, our evidence shows how the UK sought
8 to rely on its bilateral ties to curry favour with Prague and Bratislava in the hope this
9 would yield concessions by the European Council on sensitive Article 50 topics. To
10 this end, the UK increased its diplomatic operations and even offered Czechia an
11 enhanced partnership. However, the UK came away largely empty handed, with the
12 exception of a so-called Lex Brexit passed in both countries to secure UK residents
13 rights in the event the phase one of Brexit talks collapsed. Hence, this form of
14 disintegration did not end up undermining the cohesiveness of EU foreign policy –
15 although Article 50 negotiations are a distinctive, perhaps even sui generis, type of
16 diplomatic wrangle. We also show that, from the reputational perspective, handling of
17 Brexit has been steadily impairing the perception of the UK in the eyes of these two
18 EU member states, with the UK’s misconceptions of how to negotiate its withdrawal
19 from the EU being part of the reputational damage.

20 **Power asymmetry and EU differentiation**

1 The EU differentiation literature has been accused of having an imbalance between
2 overconceptualization and undertheorization ([Holzinger and Schimmelfennig 2012](#)).
3 Nested within this tension, we argue, is the power dimension of differentiation as an
4 under-researched problematic both conceptually and empirically in this field of study.
5 EU differentiation has many facets, but the different outcomes that have arisen from
6 differentiated membership of the EU and the single market have one thing in
7 common, namely: they stem from states' fears over the pace and depth of integration
8 when negotiating treaties on integration ([Leuffen et al. 2013](#); [Schimmelfennig and](#)
9 [Winzen 2014](#)). The resulting differentiation can take an external or internal form;
10 internal differentiation consists of variance among EU member states' participation in
11 common policies such as asylum and home affairs; external differentiation occurs
12 when non-EU members participate in various ways in EU policies. Nevertheless,
13 these two types of differentiation are dependent on accepting the legitimizing
14 principle of the EU, notably that pooling sovereignty is the best response to
15 interdependence. It is on that basis that non-EU states participate in selected tranches
16 of integration (whether the EEA for Iceland or Norway, or customs union
17 membership for Turkey as a pathway to eventual membership itself), although this
18 kind of association typically depends on low politicization to accept interdependence
19 as a non-member ([Schimmelfennig et al. 2015](#)). Internal differentiation involves
20 drawing boundaries around the horizontal reach of EU policies among member states
21 that nonetheless share functional integration into the 'single organizational and

1 member state core' of Europe ([Schimmelfennig et al. 2015](#): 757) overseen by the
2 EU's legal-political institutional architecture. Consequently, much of the research on
3 differentiation focuses on the reasoning behind seeking this kind of accommodation
4 with the EU and, equally importantly, what the practical outcomes of such
5 arrangements are. In this vein, constitutional differentiation via treaty clauses has
6 been shown to be the product of resistance to EU authority by Eurosceptic member
7 states or those subject to a constraining dissensus over integration ([Schimmelfennig
8 and Winzen 2014](#)), while formal or even symbolic differentiation has been shown in
9 practice to leave room for informal practices of alignment or cooperation ([Adler-
10 Nissen 2009](#)).

11 However, the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership posed a new
12 conundrum. The unexpected result left the UK wrangling over what can best be
13 dubbed differentiated *disintegration*, because it refers to a situation where a third
14 country seeks a looser relationship with the EU while also contesting the legitimacy
15 of the EU system ([Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2020](#)). This dynamic brought to light
16 a largely hidden facet of differentiation – power asymmetry. That is, owing to the size
17 of its internal market and an increasing willingness to leverage access to it, the EU has
18 the power to set the terms of trade with its immediate neighbours. This clout was
19 already obvious in the events that followed the February 2014 referendum in
20 Switzerland, where voters opted to restrict EU migration. The European Commission
21 swiftly retaliated by excluding Switzerland from participation in the Erasmus

1 university exchange and the €80 billion research funding program Horizon 2020,
2 which the Swiss help finance via the money they commit in order to participate in the
3 single market. In September 2014, a compromise was reached allowing Swiss
4 universities to participate in some EU-funded research, with continued participation
5 dependent upon Switzerland accepting the extension of free movement to Croatian
6 citizens following the last EU enlargement (ibid.).

7 Two features help mask the power dynamics underlying traditional
8 differentiated integration. Firstly, in the case of internal differentiation, treaty-based
9 attempts to opt out of expanding EU competences afford even weak member states a
10 strong bargaining position by virtue of wielding a veto over treaty change
11 ([Schimmelfennig 2018](#)). Although the EU is seen from the perspective of comparative
12 federalism as akin to asymmetric federation ([Glencross 2009](#)), the unanimity
13 requirement for treaty change limits asymmetry in such instances and thus can be
14 used to extract concessions. Secondly, in the context of external differentiation, low
15 politicization helps explain the reduced significance of power asymmetry. That is, the
16 disadvantageous material bargaining position of non-member states seeking to
17 participate selectively in EU policies is a tacit condition of external differentiation
18 (e.g. Swiss participation in Horizon 2020), but not necessarily a bone of contention
19 when a lack of politicization allows for a permissive consensus between the EU and a
20 non-member state.

1 What both the Swiss and UK examples show, however, is that the explicitly
2 political act of pursuing differentiated disintegration brings to the fore power
3 asymmetry. In the Swiss instance, as [Schimmelfennig \(2018: 1170\)](#) writes,
4 ‘Switzerland’s unfavorable bargaining position overrode popular demand for
5 differentiated disintegration’. Brexit creates the exact same risk of potential exclusion
6 from EU policies if the UK does not conform to the preferences of member states
7 when requesting, in effect, to opt back into common policies. This asymmetric power
8 of exclusion has already been demonstrated in the wrangling over the military element
9 of the Galileo satellite navigation system, which the EU decided in 2018 to limit UK
10 participation in. While the endpoint of UK disintegration remains unknown
11 ([Glencross 2020](#)), the very attempt to pursue EU withdrawal has changed power
12 relations within the UK’s bilateral relationships as London’s diplomatic strategy
13 during the first phase of Brexit talks was to find allies from within to compensate for
14 its weak bargaining position. This *divide et impera* approach was a key part of the
15 UK’s ‘adversarial bargaining approach’ adopted in spite of the UK’s smaller
16 economic size when negotiating with the EU ([Martill and Staiger 2020](#)). The aim here
17 is not to explain this unusual bargaining stance, but rather to examine the bilateral
18 impact of EU disintegration and the role that power asymmetries play in this
19 negotiating situation. For this purpose, we focus on analysing the changing nature of
20 UK diplomacy with Slovakia and Czechia after the Brexit referendum in the first

1 phase of Brexit negotiations until the Withdrawal Agreement was concluded in late
2 2019.

3 [The UK's reliance on bilateralism after Brexit: Czechia and](#) 4 [Slovakia](#)

5 Following the 2016 referendum on EU membership, the UK systematically
6 emphasized the ties of friendship and partnership with Czechia and Slovakia,
7 reiterating that both countries matter greatly to the UK ([Government of the Czech](#)
8 [Republic 2018](#); [Government of the Slovak Republic 2019](#); [HM Government 2018](#)).

9 What was also clearly stated on the British side is the conviction that Brexit will not
10 change the bilateral relationship with Czechia and Slovakia. If anything, the bilateral
11 relationship would only be strengthened because of Brexit according to UK officials
12 (Interview #3, #17, #25, #31). Indeed, in parallel with the ongoing Article 50
13 discussions, the British side invariably framed Brexit as an opportunity to strengthen
14 the relationship. As the interviews made clear, 'not only will UK-Czech relations
15 survive Brexit, they will thrive after Brexit' (Interview #5), or 'Brexit might actually
16 take the mutual relationship to new heights' (Interview #31). At the same time, UK
17 officials accentuated the strong will across all British departments to keep both
18 countries as the UK's strong allies, with this accent being more evident in the Czech
19 case. Here, the British declared their desire to keep the 'close', 'warm', 'friendly',

1 'great' relationship with the country that would only get stronger and more vibrant
2 because of Brexit (especially Interview #17).

3 Officially, the UK sent the message that it pursued a common strategy vis-à-
4 vis the EU27 in the context of Article 50 negotiations, as demonstrated by the
5 following statements: 'we approach our partners in the EU27 strategically' (Interview
6 #10) or 'we approach all our EU27 partners with the same degree of respect and
7 dignity' (Interview #16). Yet, while the Slovaks believe that the British truly approach
8 them in the same way as the Czechs ('there is no difference between how they
9 approach Slovakia and Czechia' [Interview #24]), the Czechs discerned certain
10 differences ('they think they can influence us more easily. They think we are more
11 likely to break the EU unity. Also, they know that the UK is not so important for
12 Slovakia as it is for us' [Interview #30, very similarly also Interview #21]). Indeed,
13 the underlying assumption on the British side seemed to be that due to the importance
14 of Anglo-Czech trade in general and the country's large trade surplus with the UK, it
15 was the Czech Republic that might be more prone to break ranks with the EU27.

16 To be sure, in contrast to Slovakia, Czechia has long regarded the UK as an
17 important (both strategically and ideologically) likeminded partner within the
18 European power game, having allied closely with it on numerous issues in EU policy,
19 including deepening of the single market, further liberalization of global trade,
20 attitudes towards the Eurozone (of which they are both non-members), nuclear power,
21 sanctions against Russia or the EU Emissions Trading System (for a more detailed

1 exposition of this point, see especially [Brusenbauch Meislová 2019](#)). In a sense, as the
2 EU's awkward but respected member state, the UK often provided a convenient
3 shield for the Czech Republic in voicing its Eurosceptic viewpoints ([Szent-Ivanyi et](#)
4 [al. 2018](#): 14–15; Interview #4). This interpretation is underscored by the data from the
5 EU Coalitions Explorer ([European Council on Foreign Relations 2018](#)) which
6 measures EU member states' relations within the EU coalition machinery, and which
7 indubitably show that the UK is a substantially more important partner in EU
8 policymaking for Czechia than it is for Slovakia. More specifically, whilst for the
9 Czech Republic the UK is the sixth member state that it shares most of its longer
10 standing interests on EU policy with, for Slovakia the UK does not even make it to
11 the top-16 list. In other words, the UK is far less relevant to Slovak perception of its
12 EU-level core interests.

13 The same disparity also applies to the category of most responsive and easiest-
14 to-work-with member states. Whereas the UK ranks as the sixth most responsive
15 country for Czechia, it is viewed as completely unresponsive by Slovakia. Curiously,
16 however, in terms of general contact on European policy matters, the UK's perception
17 is similar in both countries (seventh most frequently contacted EU member for
18 Czechia and eighth for Slovakia), implying that Slovakia does not receive back the
19 same level of response from the UK that it might hope to ([European Council on](#)
20 [Foreign Relations 2018](#)). Conversely, in the UK, Czechia and Slovakia are perceived
21 as the 14th and the 11th country, respectively, where the UK shares most of its longer

1 standing interests on EU policy with (which is especially interesting considering UK's
2 closer trade relationship with Czechia). The UK contacts Slovakia and Czechia to an
3 approximately similar degree of intensity (9th and 10th most contacted countries), but
4 while Czechia responds back (13th most responsive country), Slovakia does not
5 feature at all among responsive countries. Slovakia has also disappointed the UK
6 much more than Czechia (13th and 22nd most disappointing country, respectively).

7 This data helps explain why the UK seemingly invested much more energy
8 into broadening and deepening its bilateral relationships with the Czech Republic,
9 rather than Slovakia. To provide a prominent example thereof, in April 2017 (i.e.
10 shortly after the triggering of Article 50), the British embassy in Prague took an
11 expected initiative and approached the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a
12 proposal intended to create a strategic partnership between the Czech Republic and
13 the UK (Interview #11, #12, #20). The Czech side did not see this coming and was
14 genuinely surprised (and also, to an extent, flattered) by this sudden request
15 (Interview #11, #20). The UK proposal outlined potential collaboration in four areas
16 of (1) Security and Defence (Terrorism; Security/Policing; Cyber Security; NATO,
17 Defence of Europe and Defence Cooperation; Smuggling); (2) Foreign Policy
18 (Russia, Middle East and North Africa); (3) Culture, Education, Science and
19 Innovation and (Culture Exchange, Education, Scientific Cooperation, Digital
20 Growth, eGovernment, Other); (4) Trade and Business (Trade and Investment).

1 After having received the proposal, some initial discussions took place but
2 after a month, in a rather unprecedented move, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs
3 put them on hold, fearing that the country might be accused of shattering the EU's
4 unity and undermining the Brexit negotiations. After all, the European Council was
5 from the outset worried about maintaining a common stance after the UK referendum
6 and had forged a consensus on the mandate for conducting the talks that specifically
7 forbade bilateral negotiations with individual member states ([European Council](#)
8 [2017](#)). In the words of one Ministry of Foreign Affairs interviewee: 'We were afraid
9 that we would be accused of breaking ranks with the EU, so we stepped on a brake
10 and put it on hold' (Interview #11). The Czech's reserved approach to the British
11 offer was an unpleasant shock – a 'surprisingly cold shower' – to many in the UK
12 ([Brusenbauch Meislová 2019](#): 700). It was only in mid-December 2017, after the
13 breakthrough in withdrawal talks which enabled the European Commission to
14 recommend that sufficient progress had been made to proceed to the next phase of the
15 negotiations, that the Ministry was willing to 'talk' again, strictly unofficially, about
16 the concept of enhanced bilateral relations (Interview #11).

17 By contrast, not much thought was given by the British to the new, post-Brexit
18 bilateral dialogue mechanisms with Slovakia. Indeed, Slovakia was never approached
19 in the same way as Czechia was – i.e. with a specific proposal designed to establish a
20 strategic bilateral partnership between the two countries. The key official at the
21 Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs responsible for Brexit negotiations

1 as well as the Slovak bilateral agenda with the UK was genuinely surprised to hear
2 that the Czech Republic had been approached like this (Interview #23; not
3 dissimilarly also Interview #25). According to that official, the explanation for such
4 an unbalanced attitude owes much to the fact that ‘these kinds of things very much
5 depend on the activity of the British embassy and the British embassy in Bratislava
6 has not been as active as the one in Prague’ (Interview #26). In this context, it is
7 interesting to notice that it was the British embassies in the capitals, rather than FCO
8 in London, that was perceived as the main driving force behind these efforts.

9 The move to enhanced bilateralism in the wake of Brexit was illustrated
10 further by the fact that the UK strengthened its presence in Prague and Bratislava, in
11 line with its aim to ‘strengthen all our embassies in the capitals in order to compensate
12 for the loss of the EU ties’ (Interview #10). While doing so, a more resources have
13 been devoted to bilateral diplomacy with Czechia than Slovakia. Whilst official data
14 is not available, the interviews reveal that because of Brexit, the British embassies in
15 Bratislava and Prague were reinforced by two (Interview #26, #31) and at least 10
16 people (Interview #31), respectively. The rationale behind this imbalance being that
17 Bratislava is a much smaller, and hence also a much less important embassy for the
18 UK than Prague (Interview #31). At the same time, the post-referendum period was
19 characterized by a palpable increase in mutual bilateral activity between the UK on
20 the one hand and Czechia and Slovakia on the other. The increase in the number of
21 visits from UK officials and other interactions at all levels was felt especially in the

1 Czech Republic (Interview #6, #12, #21, #30). The British side acknowledged a
2 higher number of visits by the UK officials to the Czech Republic which ‘reflects the
3 continued importance that the UK attaches to its bilateral relationship with this
4 country’ (Interview #31). By way of comparison, Slovakia reports either no increase
5 in the intensity of bilateral activity (Interview #24, #29) or only a slight, and by no
6 means massive, increase (Interview #23). Also, the British side maintained that in the
7 Slovak case, there was no increase whatsoever in the bilateral activity (Interview
8 #25), as confirmed by Slovak MEPs (Interview #28, #29).

9 At the same time, there is evidence of a concerted UK approach towards all
10 countries of the Visegrad Group (Czechia, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary). On the
11 one hand, the UK dealt with each country individually in terms of visits to national
12 capitals, initiation of bilateral meetings etc. Simultaneously, however, there was also a
13 tendency to approach the Visegrad Group as one grouping. Czechia and Slovakia did
14 not mind, knowing that their clout was essentially bigger when in the company of
15 large, more powerful – and hence, also more important – Poland. Also, members of
16 the Visegrad Group knew that if they wanted ‘something’ from the UK (for instance,
17 to get a hearing at a British ministry), there was a bigger chance of success of getting
18 that meeting arranged if they acted as a group (Interview #32, #33).

19 Let us now focus on what the UK actually hoped for. There was a widespread
20 tacit understanding among officials that the increase in bilateral activity boils down to
21 the fact that Czechia and Slovakia – just like other EU27 member states – held sway

1 over Brexit decision-making: ‘The British are making rounds to persuade EU27,
2 including us, about their views on Brexit. There is more of their visits if there is some
3 kind of a deadlock’ (Interview #20). Before the start of the official Article 50
4 withdrawal negotiations, the British were ‘testing the waters’ (Interview #6, #12,
5 #21), while afterwards they were eager to discuss the details of the negotiations and
6 the ‘pending issues’ (Interview #12, #21).

7 In executing this strategy, the UK devoted disproportionately more attention to
8 Czechia than Slovakia. Put another way, the country employed a divide and conquer
9 approach in the hope of exploiting potential divisions on the EU side to its advantage
10 in its bilateral dealings with the Czech Republic, rather than in Slovakia, where their
11 *tours des capitales* was perceived as a form of ‘persuasion’, or ‘courtship’ (Interview
12 #30). As the interviews revealed, the British were ‘quite persistent when approaching
13 the Czech Republic during their outreach tours’ (Interview #21), using ‘every single
14 chance to make us show solidarity with them’ (Interview #30). In the words of one
15 interviewee, the British approached the Czechs ‘very gently’, ‘very subtly’, ‘in a
16 typical British manner’: ‘they would never say openly “OK”, so we want you to break
17 the EU position’. Still, they want us to do certain things – mostly, in the area of the
18 Irish border. They are trying because they believe that the Czech Republic might – if
19 necessary – come to the UK’s rescue during tough stages of the withdrawal process
20 (Interview #30).

1 For the UK, a question of particular importance was the Irish border question.
2 What exactly the UK side wanted to achieve was summed up by one of the
3 interviewees as follows:

4 They would not hope, for instance, for us to promote a certain time limit to the Irish
5 backstop arrangement. They were hoping if not for some official declaration, then at
6 least some kind of a doorstep statement. Of course, they could not realistically expect
7 the Czech Republic to declare ‘We will now abandon Ireland and the Irish people’
8 but they perhaps hoped for something along the let’s-have-a-time-limit-on-the-Irish-
9 backstop lines.

10 *Interview #30*

11 Apart from the border question, others’ issues the UK stressed while
12 embarking on those diplomacy tours of Czechia and Slovakia concerned mostly
13 cooperation in the area of education and scientific cooperation (student mobility,
14 qualifications, collaborative research projects between universities and/or research
15 centres) and internal security (police authorities, information sharing and access to
16 national law-enforcement databases, access to AFSJ agencies). Lastly, two topics,
17 closely connected to Brexit that always came up in bilateral talks – and that the
18 British specifically focused on – were health-care issues and UK’s post-Brexit future
19 access to the EU’s satellite navigation system Galileo (Interview #30).

20 The interviews painted an intricate picture of the UK’s efforts to make
21 bilateralism work to its advantage during the Article 50 process. In the Czech case,
22 the impression was that the British, again in an unprecedented fashion, sometimes

1 substance and procedural preferences, and both countries have laid much emphasis on
2 the EU's unity vis-à-vis Brexit. Even in the Czech Republic, a member state with a
3 strong tradition of party-based Euroscepticism and general 'Eurosceptic leanings', the
4 first political priority was to protect the cohesion and integrity of the single market.

5 As one interviewee appositely observed:

6 we would like to have special relations with the UK, among other things because of
7 the historical reasons. But the Czech Republic's first political priority is to protect the
8 cohesion of the single market, because we are economically dependent on the EU.
9 Building a privileged bilateral partnership with a post- Brexit UK comes second. The
10 potential tariff-free access to the British market would be great but the integrity of the
11 single market is much more important. The EU simply has a priority here.

12 *Interview #20; similarly also Interview #22*

13 The same applies to Slovakia, where the trade with the UK is very important,
14 too, but never at the expense of threatening the unity of the single market (Interview
15 #23).

16 Nevertheless, the UK's bilateral strategy actually did yield some results,
17 especially in Czechia, as a number of Czech non-compliance positions attest to. Let us
18 provide a couple of telling examples. Firstly, in January 2017, a prominent member of
19 the Czech government – interior minister Milan Chovanec – admonished the EU27 on
20 its conduct of Brexit and called for Czechia to individually commence talks with the
21 UK, instead of waiting for EU-UK talks (ČT24 2017). The second example pertains
22 to the Prime Minister's, Andrej Babiš's, repeated pieces of unsolicited advice that the

1 UK should actually hold a second referendum on EU membership ([King 2018](#)).
2 Interestingly enough, Slovakia as an individual member state always stuck to the
3 EU's united position on Brexit with one, and only one, exception when it joined the
4 ranks of Czechia, Poland and Hungary in the Visegrad Group declaration at the 2016
5 Bratislava summit that the group was ready to veto any UK–EU withdrawal
6 agreement that would restrict their citizens' rights to live and work in the UK ([BBC](#)
7 [2016](#)). Key reasons for Slovakia's willingness to toe the EU line on Brexit include
8 looser ties with the UK (both bilateral but also those within the EU coalition
9 machinery) and its long-term position as a 'good European'.

10 At the same time, in comparison to Slovakia, the Czech Republic was also
11 more proactive and accommodating in terms of protecting UK nationals living in the
12 country in the case of a no-deal Brexit. In January 2019, the Czech government
13 passed the so-called Lex Brexit that would provide for a transitional period for 8000
14 UK expatriates living in Czechia until the end of 2020 and guarantee within specified
15 areas British citizens 'the same treatment as if they were citizens of the European
16 Union' ([Government of the Czech Republic 2019](#)). According to the interviewees,
17 this came out of the British initiative, if not pressure: 'The British really wanted Lex
18 Brexit. They were very open about it. There was no doubt as to what they wanted'
19 (Interview #32), bringing to the surface the pragmatic, outright, strong and not-at-all
20 humble – but not confrontational – approach adopted by the British. The Czech Lex
21 Brexit, as the law became to be known, was at that time considered 'the most

1 generous of proposals made so far by any member state for Britons settled in the EU'
2 ([O'Carroll 2019](#)) and greatly appreciated by the British embassy in Prague (Interview
3 #31, #32). Later, Slovakia did the same and adopted a very similar law, but the
4 narrative was quite different from the Czech one. Here, the impression was that Lex
5 Brexit was not adopted out of UK pressure. Instead, it was more about the Slovak
6 effort to show 'a kind face' (Interview #33). Just like in the Czech case, though, the
7 British were 'really happy about' the Slovak Lex Brexit (Interview #33).

8 [How the bilateral relationship with the UK is perceived in](#) 9 [Czechia and Slovakia](#)

10 This section explores the way the UK's bilateral Brexit diplomacy affected
11 perceptions of the UK in Czechia and Slovakia. While both countries perceived Brexit
12 from the start as a serious problem (see, for instance, [Government of the Czech](#)
13 [Republic 2016](#); [Government of the Slovak Republic 2017](#)), it was viewed as such
14 especially in the Czech Republic. Indeed, in Czechia, Brexit was framed as a decision
15 with 'huge human, political, economic but also geopolitical implications'
16 ([Government of the Czech Republic 2016](#)) and generally viewed as much more
17 consequential for mutual relations. At the same time, the Czech governing elites
18 tended to put much greater rhetorical emphasis on the importance of mutual ties with
19 the UK than Slovak ones. Both countries responded to Brexit by claiming this would
20 not be a factor that would harm Czech/Slovak-UK relations (Interview #16, #19). Yet,

1 the Slovaks accepted that there would be some disruptions, reiterating that even
2 though Brexit has not thrown into question the very basic premises, on which the
3 bilateral relationship is built, they count on there being inevitably some disruptions in
4 the bilateral relationship because of Brexit (Interview #23). The Slovaks, rather than
5 the Czechs, also underlined the fact that Brexit has put the bilateral relations into
6 some sort of limbo: ‘the bilateral relations have neither improved, nor worsened
7 because of Brexit, they are still the same’. On the other hand, ‘there can be no talk
8 about any development of any sorts’, they are stalled (Interview #24).

9 Both countries also felt that they have become more important for the UK
10 (Interview #18, #21), as they hold sway over EU withdrawal negotiations (Interview
11 #18, #21). In the words of interviewees: ‘We are now definitely a more important
12 partner for the UK. The UK is now making much more effort than ever before when it
13 comes to bilateral relations with us’ (Interview #21). At the same time, there is a
14 strong conviction that both countries will be even more important to the British
15 foreign policy after the UK’s withdrawal (Interview #26, #30). Some in the Czech
16 Republic, rather than in Slovakia, were flattered by the large amount of British
17 attention (Interview #11, #20). For instance, with regard to the strategic partnership
18 idea mentioned in the ‘Power asymmetry and EU differentiation’ section, it was
19 emphasized that such an offer from the British is something ‘quite exceptional’
20 (Interview #20), interpreting this as proof of the rising strategic value of the mutual
21 relationship (Interview #11, #20) (leaving aside the fact that the reality has much

1 more to do with the British need to secure support of EU27 for a good deal). Czechia
2 also showed a higher degree of concerns about Brexit-related policy implications,
3 especially in terms of its EU policymaking. In a country that has

4 long directly benefited from the wealth of British expertise and its key networks,
5 there is a serious concern if (let alone how and when) the thick network of bilateral
6 contacts, exchanges, and consultations as well as the channels and mechanisms for
7 knowledge exchange will be replicated bilaterally post-Brexit.

8 *[Brusebauch Meislova 2019: 699; Interview #4, #7](#)*

9 This contrasts with Slovakia's representatives' belief that the country will
10 encounter no problems without the UK and that the informal networks will adapt
11 quickly and easily to the UK-free environment (Interview #23). Put differently, there
12 are no particular worries about the loss of a direct dialogue between the countries, as
13 articulated in the Czech case (Interview #27).

14 In general terms, the Czechs were long considered ahead of the Slovaks in
15 terms of their preparations for Brexit, with a partial explanation being that the Slovaks
16 could not start preparing in time, because of holding the rotating presidency in the
17 second half of 2016. As one Czech official put it: 'The Slovaks overslept' (Interview
18 #12). The Czech Republic also reinforced its capacities in London to manage the
19 effects of Brexit to a larger extent than Slovakia. While the Slovak embassy in
20 London was strengthened by one person (Interview #26), the staff at the Czech
21 embassy grew by at least four people (Interview #21). What is more, in June 2017, the

1 Czech Government made a decision to open a new Czech Consulate General in
2 Manchester, staffed by seven people, which started to operate in March 2019. In
3 addition, the debate on the shape of post-Brexit bilateral relations, and Brexit
4 implications in general, appears to have been more lively and developed in the Czech
5 Republic. Apart from the British proposal mentioned above, other ideas were floated
6 for closer post-Brexit consultation formats with the UK that might potentially replace
7 the habitual contact at regular EU meetings. One of them involved drawing upon the
8 concept of the Enhanced Political Dialogue which was signed in December 2010.
9 This stated, back in 2010, that both sides wish to strengthen the bilateral political
10 dialogue, the countries pledged to organize more bilateral meetings at various levels
11 (prime ministerial level, ministerial level, down to the level of departmental directors)
12 to discuss various issues of mutual interest. Yet, this rare CZ–UK bilateral initiative
13 represented a declarative upgrading of mutual bilateral relations but never fulfilled its
14 potential – mostly because of the lack of political commitment, asymmetric
15 expectations (larger on the Czech side), strategic differences between the Czech
16 Republic and the UK and the lack of strategic and foreign policy thinking on the
17 Czech part (Interview #2). Another idea that might help mitigate the effects of both
18 countries drifting apart in the wake of Brexit is that they could establish something
19 akin to the Czech–German Strategic Dialogue (Interview #8). Yet another idea
20 pertains to structured ministerial consultations ([Brusenbauch Meislová 2019](#): 700). In

1 marked contrast, no such debate seems to have surrounded the Slovak–UK post-
2 Brexit relationship.

3 Compared to Slovakia, the Czech Republic also took a more emotional
4 approach to Brexit. The Czech government employed ‘the frame of loss’ in its
5 discourse on Brexit much more often than Slovakia. With the ‘we will miss the UK in
6 the EU’ narrative often employed in this context, this framing corresponds with the
7 ‘discernible affection (a warmth even) for the British people in the Czech Republic
8 and a certain abiding fascination with many things British’ ([Brusenbauch Meislová](#)
9 [2019](#): 693). Moreover, in interviews and other primary sources, one can trace a higher
10 degree of sympathy with the UK and its interests on the Czech side than on the Slovak
11 one, as illustrated, for instance, by the Czech Prime Minister Babiš’s statement of
12 September 2018 that he felt ‘sorry’ for the UK (BBC Four 2018) or Minister of
13 Foreign Affairs Zaoralek’s statement that ‘the British discontent with the EU can be
14 understood’ ([Embassy of the Czech Republic in London 2017](#)). These contrast
15 somewhat sharply with Slovak Prime Minister’s, Robert Fico’s, assertions that if
16 ‘someone is going to be hurt more by Brexit, it must be the UK’ ([Government of the](#)
17 [Slovak Republic 2017](#)).

18 Furthermore, the two countries’ bilateral relationships with the UK have been
19 overshadowed by the Article 50 withdrawal process (Interview #2, #11; Brusenbauch
20 Meislová 2019: 698). As one interviewee put it, ‘Even though we cannot say this in
21 public, Brexit has enormously interfered in the bilateral level of mutual relations’

1 (Interview #18). What is more, some Czech and Slovak officials have been literally
2 unable to distinguish between bilateral relations and the EU–UK relations as such
3 (Interview #22, #29). In both cases, Czech and Slovak relationships with the UK also
4 seem to have inevitably been affected by the Brexit arm wrestling. Interviews indicate
5 a certain amount of irritation by the UK’s handling of withdrawal negotiations and the
6 inability of the British to get Brexit done. It is not outright antagonism towards the
7 UK but rather a subtle form of consternation generated by the Brexit saga (Interview
8 #22). To phrase it in the words of one Czech official, ‘They had such a good
9 reputation – of being effective, pragmatic and trustworthy before the referendum. And
10 now it is all shattered. There is no common sense in their approach to the EU’
11 (Interview #14). For others, ‘There is no escaping the fact that Brexit has, if to a small
12 degree, poisoned Czech perceptions of the British’ (Interview #18). The level of
13 frustration appears to be even higher in Slovakia, which reports ‘disastrous’
14 (Interview #24) and ‘tortuous’ (Interview #28) conduct of affairs with the Brits who
15 were ‘unable to come up with any realistic proposals that could be worked on’
16 (Interview #28). Slovakia has also been keener than Czechia to emphasize that Brexit
17 should be dealt with quickly so that the EU can move on to other priorities
18 ([Government of the Slovak Republic 2019](#)), indicating that for Slovakia, Brexit has
19 somewhat slipped down the list of priorities throughout the time. In addition, both
20 countries also view the UK as an EU member states that has disappointed them most
21 ([European Council on Foreign Relations 2018](#)).

1 Conclusion: turning the tables? Power asymmetry after Brexit

2 This chapter examined the process of managing UK–EU disintegration from the
3 perspective of what it reveals about the role of power asymmetries in bilateral
4 relations between the UK and smaller EU member states, Czechia and Slovakia.

5 These two countries' relations with the UK have long been highly asymmetrical
6 because of hard and soft power disparities that gave rise to notable differences in their
7 relative ability to influence wider European politics and policies as compared to the
8 UK, which used its economic and political clout to shape key developments in EU
9 integration. Hence, these countries provide a most-likely case testing ground for any
10 potential Brexit-related impact on the power dynamics undergirding bilateral relations
11 in countries that are not subject to regularized intergovernmentalism with the UK.

12 Even more so, given that, as discussed in the 'Power asymmetry and EU
13 differentiation' section, the UK adopted a hard bargaining stance during the Article 50
14 negotiations that belied the weakening of the UK's structural power as a country
15 leaving the EU and asking for concessions from the EU27.

16 The interview data presented here clearly demonstrate the renewed importance
17 of bilateralism for the UK's engagement with European partners as a consequence of
18 Brexit. Relationships with national capitals across the EU took on a new significance,
19 with the UK assigning greater priority and personnel to European diplomacy after a
20 period of benign neglect. Notwithstanding the UK diplomats' measured language of

1 engaging EU27 countries with the same degree of respect and dignity, we have shown
2 that the UK clearly sought to make its traditional power asymmetry work to secure its
3 interests in the first phase of Brexit negotiations. This was seen in the manner in
4 which the UK unexpectedly offered a new strategic partnership with Czechia, a sign
5 that the British government considered its stronger economic and security ties with
6 Prague could offer useful leverage as compared with Slovakia. This gambit revealed
7 the novelty of the post 2016 referendum situation in that it was the first time the
8 approach for cooperation came from the UK side. Equally revealing is the fact the UK
9 side expected to find a receptive audience in Prague for its proposals, thereby making
10 Czechia a test case of the cohesiveness of EU negotiating strategy in phase one of
11 Brexit. Extrapolating lessons for the future conduct of how EU foreign policy will be
12 affected by post-Brexit bilateralism is not obvious given the very distinctive structural
13 features inherent to the Article 50 talks.

14 However, we discern a clear pattern of behaviour, evidenced by the
15 interviewees, showing that UK diplomats organizing bilateral meetings in Prague and
16 Bratislava whose timing was a function of issues raised during the progress of Article
17 50 talks. Nevertheless, neither country was prepared to undermine the common EU
18 negotiating position. These meetings included, in both countries, a request to create
19 adequate contingency arrangements in the event of both sides failing to agree a
20 withdrawal treaty. The push for a so-called Lex Brexit in Slovakia and Czechia was
21 ultimately successful – although these were not the only EU27 countries to implement

1 such legislation. However, the need to ask for such a favour, in an overall context
2 where no concessions from the EU were forthcoming, offers a glimpse of the power
3 recalibration that managing EU disintegration presents for the UK. In addition, both
4 countries were unafraid to signal, through the Visegrad Group, their own red lines for
5 Brexit concerning the protection of the legal rights of EU citizens residing in the UK.

6 From a reputational perspective, our evidence suggests that conduct of the
7 Brexit negotiations seems to have steadily impaired the perception of the UK –
8 renowned for its once great (and long-cultivated) reputation of a trustworthy diplomat
9 and a highly efficient, reliable negotiator – in the eyes of these two EU member states.
10 The way in which the UK negotiated its withdrawal from the EU has been largely
11 perceived as chaotic, unsystematic and replete with excesses – and seen as further
12 demonstration of the UK’s accelerating decline – having left Czech and Slovak
13 partners somewhat confused and disappointed. Yet, all of this has been happening at
14 the very exact moment when the UK, which finds itself in the midst of a
15 transformation to post-EU/post-Brexit diplomacy, needs allies perhaps more than ever
16 before.

17 In conclusion, we argue that the UK’s misconceptions of how to negotiate its
18 withdrawal from the EU (on this, see especially [Dunlop et al. 2020](#); [Figueira and](#)
19 [Martill 2020](#); [McConnell and Tormey 2020](#)) is part of the reputational damage, as
20 illustrated by the interview data. At the same time, with the notion of reputation being
21 a measure of status and an influential component of international politics ([Crescenzi](#)

1 [2018](#)), the Brexit-related loss of the UK's diplomatic reputation offers a promising
2 future research avenue, as it is bound to affect not only the ongoing talks on the future
3 UK–EU partnership but also the wider conduct of the UK's post-Brexit diplomacy as
4 such.

5 Finally, there remains ample potential for further research. Most importantly,
6 the subject matter calls for a broader comparative perspective, so it might be
7 interesting to broaden the scope of this power-oriented research to include more EU
8 member states. Also investigating how withdrawal negotiations compare to
9 negotiations on future UK–EU relations in the sense of differentiation and power
10 asymmetry might be a promising future research avenue.

11 [Funding information](#)

12 In Monika Brusenbauch Meislova's case, the writing of this chapter was supported by
13 Masaryk University (MUNI/A/1138/2020 Perspectives of European Integration in
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