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## Politics of the Global Economy "Brexit"

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## **Introduction**

This paper will explain the motives behind the unexpected decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, a moment that will forever be known as “Brexit.” On June 23, 2016, the UK voted 52 percent to 48 percent to withdraw from the EU, of which it had been a member since the organization’s founding in 1992. The result of the referendum shocked the world and overturned the assumption that the United Kingdom, though persistently ambivalent about the transnational governing body, would never make the final break. The failure of pro-EU Prime Minister David Cameron to convince his countrymen to preserve the status quo arrangement therefore revealed that longstanding British frustrations with the European Union ran deeper than anticipated. This essay argues that the primary contributing causes of Brexit were sovereignty, national identity, economic frustration, and opposition to immigration.

The next section of this essay discusses four determinants that academics and media outlets have identified as potentially responsible for Brexit. The third section details the key components of polls collected during the referendum campaign, as well as relevant anecdotes from the media. The fourth section compiles findings from the polling data and press accounts and compares them to the narratives of the aforementioned scholars and media publications. Finally, the fifth section discusses the implications of the four possible causes and how they compare to the original thesis.

## **Theory**

Since the UK’s narrow decision to leave the European Union, social researchers and commentators have closely examined the results to uncover the specific reasons for the “leave” campaign’s upset victory. From the data, academics have theorized about the motivations of

those who voted to leave the EU. One study, published by two Icelandic economics professors, Agust Arnorsson and Gylfi Zoega, analyzed the results of the Brexit referendum and found that “leave” voters were typically older, less-educated, and struggling economically.<sup>1</sup> They surmised that these voters were angry about the decline of manufacturing jobs and the increase in immigration stemming from the transformation of the British economy. As the “losers” under the current system, Arnorsson and Zoega deduced that these disadvantaged groups wanted to force change.<sup>2</sup> Another inquiry, conducted by University of London Professor Eric Kaufmann, used data from the 2015 British parliamentary election to conclude that individual values, not economic disparity, were the key determinants of who would support Brexit.<sup>3</sup> In other words, his research found that people voted based on their own political positions and beliefs about the world, rather than as unified blocs.

To supplement this scholarly research, it is essential to review primary sources during the time of the vote to explain the rationales of “leave” voters. Depending on their political leanings, British media sources interpreted the motivations of these voters quite differently. Right-leaning publications framed the referendum as a movement driven primarily by concerns about national control over the economy and immigration, the increasing obtrusiveness of EU governance, and the devastating consequences of this interference to non-beneficiaries of the existing system. *The Daily Mail* explained the urgent situation facing British voters: “Indeed, it is the EU fervour of these globalised elites, telling democracies how to vote, that has enraged working-class communities in Britain who, more than anyone, have had to cope with mass migration and have

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<sup>1</sup> Agust Arnorsson and Gylfi Zoega, “On the Causes of Brexit,” *CES-IFO*, working papers, no. 6056 (August 23, 2016): 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Kaufmann, “It’s NOT the Economy, Stupid: Brexit as a Story of Personal Values,” *London School of Economics* (2016): 1-5.

every right to feel abandoned.”<sup>4</sup> *The Sun*, with a more partisan flair, similarly asserted, “Vote Leave, and we will reassert our sovereignty — embracing a future as a self-governing, powerful nation envied by all. We will re-establish the basic principle that we are governed by politicians we elect or eject every five years, not foreign bureaucrats.”<sup>5</sup> Many British citizens perceived a loss of control over their lives and country and felt increasingly unable to influence important policy decisions.

Left-leaning media outlets, on the other hand, described “leave” voters as insular, anti-immigration, and overly fond Britain’s flawed history. *The Guardian* warned that Brexit “...risked descending into a plebiscite on whether immigrants are a good or a bad thing. To see what is at stake, just consider the dark forces that could so easily become emboldened by a narrow insistence on putting the indigenous first.”<sup>6</sup> *The Mirror*, meanwhile, portrayed the “leave” campaign as misguided nostalgia: “The past also contained tuberculosis and rickets, polio and smallpox, fewer workplace rights and ‘No Dogs, No Irish, No Blacks’ signs in pub windows. The past was unkindler than the present, a place in which same-sex relationships were not just a sin but a crime, and pride meant the most inventive way of putting Johnny Foreigner’s nose out of joint.”<sup>7</sup> Publications on the left saw a desire among “leave” voters to regain past dominance and re-impose old power structures.

The theories laid out by scholars and the British media provide potential insights into the reasons Brexit occurred. Arnorsson and Zoega cite age, education, and income as the major

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<sup>4</sup> “If You Believe in Britain, Vote Leave. Lies, Greedy Elites and a Divided, Dying Europe: Why We Could Have a Great Future Outside a Broken EU,” *The Daily Mail*, June 21, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> “We Urge Our Readers to BeLEAVE in Britain and Vote to Quit the EU on June 23,” *The Sun*, June 13, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> “The Guardian View on the EU Referendum: Keep Connected and Inclusive, Not Angry and Isolated,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> “Make the EU Referendum Victory in Europe Day and Vote Remain for the Sake of the Future,” *The Mirror*, June 18, 2016, accessed April 23, 2017.

determinants; Kaufmann believes individual values were the primary cause; right-leaning media sources view sovereignty over the economy and immigration, as well as overbearing government, as the main factors; and left-leaning outlets see the “leave” vote as stemming from xenophobia and the desire to restore a less inclusive past. To understand these narratives in greater detail, polling data is used to uncover the motivations of “leave” supporters.

### **Methodology**

In this section, polling data is examined to explain why “leave” campaign supporters voted as they did. Specifically, the analysis considers whether any of the following four possible determinants behind the Brexit vote dominated the others: 1.) age, education, and income; 2.) individual values; 3.) national sovereignty over the economy and immigration; and 4.) xenophobia and nostalgia. The first three potential determinants were tested by analyzing polls taken around the time of the election. They asked questions about voters’ motivations for their decision on the referendum and ascertained the demographic characteristics of the people surveyed. The data was collected by YouGov (which surveyed 3,766 UK adults), Survation/IG Group (1,003 UK adults and 959 likely voters for the remain/leave referendum and voter rationale questions), ComRes (1,032 UK adults), and Lord Ashcroft Polls (12,369 UK adult voters).<sup>8 9 10 11</sup> The first three surveys were taken just before the referendum, while the Lord Ashcroft poll was taken immediately after people had voted.

The fourth factor, fear of immigrants and yearning for the past, is difficult to test using data due to perceived social pressures against holding such opinions. The applicability of the

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<sup>8</sup> “YouGov/Times Survey Results,” *YouGov* (June 22, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017): 1.

<sup>9</sup> “EU Referendum Poll,” *Survation* (June 21, 2016, accessed April 27, 2017): 1, 5, 13.

<sup>10</sup> “Daily Mail / ITV News – EU Referendum Survey,” *ComRes* (June 22, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017): 1.

<sup>11</sup> Lord Ashcroft, “How the United Kingdom Voted on Thursday... And Why,” *Lordashcroftpolls.com*, June 24, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017.

fourth determinant is therefore tested by examining anecdotal evidence of “leave” leaders’ comments and actions and analyzing incidents of violence against immigrants, which may reveal xenophobia and nostalgia to be the motives for supporting Brexit. These anecdotes are collected from numerous British news outlets, such as *The Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph*,<sup>12</sup> the BBC, *The Daily Mail*, *The Independent*, and *The Guardian*. To add empirical weight to this analysis, the four aforementioned surveys are investigated for questions concerning voter sentiments about immigrants. This method has significant limitations, especially the potential for confirmation bias, but it should adequately reveal the motivations of many “leave” voters.

To determine whether a particular determinant best explains the outcome of the vote, specific criteria are used to assess the explanatory power of each. High percentages of older, less-educated, and lower-income people supporting Brexit would support the first possible determinant; high percentages of people supporting national control over the economy and immigration would support the second and third potential factors; and significant amounts of anecdotal evidence about “leave” leaders using anti-immigrant rhetoric or campaign materials, reports of high levels of post-referendum racism and hate crimes, and “anti-immigrant” responses among “leave” voters to particular survey questions about immigration would support the fourth possible motive for Brexit. In each case, findings that directly contradict any of the above conditions will rule out the determinant in question as a cause.

### **Analysis**

#### Age, Education, and Income

Polling results indicate that the data strongly support the first possible cause of Brexit, that of “leave” voters being older, less-educated, and of lesser financial means. While the

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<sup>12</sup> In the United Kingdom, many newspapers have separate Sunday editions.

YouGov poll did not ask respondents about their education levels, its findings on age and income reinforce the above-mentioned theory for why Brexit occurred. For example, the poll showed that of the four age groups tested (18-to-24, 25-to-49, 50-to-64, and 65+), the two oldest groups would vote to 51 percent to 38 percent and 59 percent to 34 percent, respectively, to leave the EU.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the two youngest groups were predicted to vote 72 percent to 19 percent and 48 percent to 40 percent, respectively, to remain.<sup>14</sup> Differences in income or “social grade,” were also reflected in the poll.<sup>15</sup> The working-class and poor were projected to vote 54 percent to 34 percent in favor of Brexit, while the wealthy were forecast to vote 53 percent to 38 percent against it.<sup>16</sup>

The Survation/IG Group survey also supports the first potential explanation, though it only tests for age among the three criteria examined in this section. Of the three age groups tested (18-to-34, 35-to-54, and 55+), it revealed that the 55+ group would vote 42.6 percent to 32.8 percent to leave the EU, while the 18-to-34 and 35-to-54 age groups would vote 47.0 percent to 36.4 percent and 40.4 percent to 37.0 percent, respectively, to remain.<sup>17</sup> The third survey, from ComRes, significantly reinforces the first potential cause as well, especially as it tests for all the criteria. It showed that among six age groups (18-to-24, 25-to-34, 35-to-44, 45-to-54, 55-to-64, and 65+), the three oldest groups would vote 47 percent to 36 percent, 55 percent to 31 percent, and 50 percent to 38 percent, respectively, to support Brexit.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the three youngest age groups were predicted to vote 65 percent to 32 percent, 64 percent to 27

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<sup>13</sup> “YouGov/Times Survey Results,” 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> “EU Referendum Poll,” 5.

<sup>18</sup> “Daily Mail / ITV News – EU Referendum Survey,” 9.

percent, and 54 percent to 37 percent, respectively, to oppose it.<sup>19</sup> In terms of educational background, the poll found that people without a university education would vote 52 percent to 35 percent to leave the EU, while those with a university education would vote 72 percent to 21 percent to remain.<sup>20</sup> With regard to income, the working class and low-income groups were projected to vote 53 percent to 33 percent and 49 percent to 37 percent, respectively, in favor of Brexit.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the upper and middle classes were calculated as voting 61 percent to 32 percent and 52 percent to 37 percent, respectively, against it.<sup>22</sup>

Lastly, the Lord Ashcroft poll captures similar trends in support of the theory that age, income, and education determined the Brexit vote, the only difference being that it was taken after the referendum. Of the age groups studied (18-to-24, 25-to-34, 35-to-44, 45-to-54, 55-to-64 and 65+), the oldest three voted 56 percent to 44 percent, 57 percent to 43 percent, and 60 percent to 40 percent, respectively, to leave the EU. Meanwhile, the youngest three groups voted 73 percent to 27 percent, 62 percent to 38 percent, and 52 percent to 48 percent, respectively, to remain.<sup>23</sup> Regarding education, people without a university degree were divided into three categories: those without any schooling, those who had finished primary schooling, and those who finished secondary schooling.<sup>24</sup> These three groups voted 82 percent to 18 percent, 72 percent to 28 percent, and 64 percent to 36 percent, respectively, in favor of Brexit.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, those with a college degree, a higher university degree, or who were “still in full-time education” voted 57 percent to 43 percent, 64 percent to 36 percent, and 81 percent to 19 percent,

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Lord Ashcroft, “How the United Kingdom Voted on Thursday... And Why.”

<sup>24</sup> Lord Ashcroft Polls, “EU Referendum ‘How Did You Vote’ Poll,” *Lordashcroftpolls.com* (June 23, 2016, accessed April 27, 2017): 9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*



respectively, to oppose it.<sup>26</sup> By income, there was a slight divergence from the YouGov and ComRes polls, as the upper-middle class voted 51 percent to 49 percent to leave the EU, joining the lower-middle and working/lower classes, which each supported Brexit 64 percent to 36 percent margins.<sup>27</sup> The upper class, meanwhile, voted 57 percent to 43 percent against Brexit.<sup>28</sup>

The polling results on age, education, and income show that older, less-educated, and less wealthy voters supported Brexit by significant majorities, while younger, well-educated, and affluent voters just as strongly opposed it. The narrow overall margin of 52 percent to 48 percent in favor of the “leave” camp makes clear that without such strong turnout among the pro-Brexit groups, the shocking result could never have occurred. The first potential determinant holds up under the scrutiny of polling data and is, therefore, a plausible explanation.

#### Individual Values and National Sovereignty Over the Economy and Immigration

The data also support the second and third possible causes of Brexit: individual values and a desire for national control over the economy and immigration. According to YouGov, among the 3,641 registered voters who said they supported Brexit, 45 percent believed that leaving the EU would simultaneously promote cooperation with other countries and the UK's right to act independently.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, 35 percent believed that exiting the EU would allow for more effective immigration policy and enforcement.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the Survation/IG Group poll revealed that of those registered voters who supported the break with the EU, the two most popular driving factors were controlling immigration levels to the UK (31.7 percent) and sovereignty/control of the lawmaking process (25.8 percent).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> “YouGov/Times Survey Results,” 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> “EU Referendum Poll,” 13.

Meanwhile, the ComRes poll listed a series of statements to determine their accuracy in describing voters' motivations. The statements, "...that we..." "...can take back control," "...could save £350 million a week sent to the EU," "...could introduce an Australian-style point system for immigration," and "...wouldn't have to accept Turkish immigrants if they joined the EU" caused 44 percent, 37 percent, 39 percent, and 32 percent of those polled, respectively, to be more likely to vote to leave the EU.<sup>32</sup> No other tested statements induced more than 20 percent of voters to reach the same conclusion.<sup>33</sup> Finally, The Lord Ashcroft poll revealed that the top concerns of "leave" voters were sovereignty and immigration. Forty-nine percent of voters who chose the "leave" option did so because they wanted Parliament (as opposed to the EU government in Brussels) to handle political decisions concerning the United Kingdom, while 33 percent indicated that they sought greater national control over the UK's borders and immigration policy.<sup>34</sup>

The results of these polls reveal that "leave" voters were very concerned about the EU's gradual assumption of national government functions, especially those dealing with the economy and immigration. Many people in the UK cherished the ability to control these aspects of public policy and feared that the EU was usurping democratic power.<sup>35</sup> <sup>36</sup> Because the data exhibit this trend, they support the arguments that individual values and a desire for sovereignty over economic matters and immigration were strong determinants of the referendum's outcome. These claims are closely linked because national sovereignty was a key ideal of many voters who backed Brexit.

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<sup>32</sup> "Daily Mail / ITV News – EU Referendum Survey," 27, 31, 39, 42.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, 36, 45, 48.

<sup>34</sup> Lord Ashcroft, "How the United Kingdom Voted on Thursday... And Why."

<sup>35</sup> "Daily Mail / ITV News – EU Referendum Survey," 36.

<sup>36</sup> "EU Referendum Poll," 13.

## Xenophobia and Nostalgia

The fourth possible determinant, that xenophobia and nostalgia motivated “leave” voters, cannot be measured quantitatively to the same extent as the previous three explanations because few people will openly admit to being xenophobic due to the social stigma attached to such a viewpoint. As such, the most effective means of testing this theory is to analyze “leave” campaign leaders’ statements and actions, as well as election material, that suggest pro-Brexit voters are fearful of immigrants and change. An investigation of news sources published throughout the campaign reveals that the prejudicial/tribalist explanation for the Brexit vote is at least somewhat credible. Nigel Farage, leader of the populist right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and other “leave” leaders fueled this narrative through their controversial rhetoric and campaign materials. In early June 2016, for example, Farage gave an interview to *The Sunday Telegraph* and stated that voting “remain” could potentially lead to mass sexual attacks on women by migrant men from Europe and North Africa.<sup>37</sup> Such an event had occurred in Cologne, Germany, during New Year’s Eve celebrations months earlier.<sup>38</sup> Many politicians, including prominent Conservative members of Parliament backing Brexit, sharply criticized Farage for engaging in scaremongering.<sup>39</sup>

Next, less than two weeks before the vote, Farage unveiled a campaign poster titled “Breaking Point: The EU has failed us all,” which urged the UK to control its borders.<sup>40</sup> The poster featured a picture of male Syrian refugees on the Slovenian border during the 2015 European migrant crisis and immediately elicited condemnation from the major British political

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<sup>37</sup> Tim Ross, “Nigel Farage: Migrants could pose sex attack threat to Britain,” *Telegraph.co.uk*, June 4, 2016, accessed April 29, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> “EU Referendum: Nigel Farage Sex Attack Claims ‘Outrageous,’” *Bbc.com*, June 5, 2016, accessed April 29, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Matt Dathan, “Nigel Farage in Racism Storm over Brexit Poster Showing Thousands of Male Refugees and Warning Country Is at ‘Breaking Point,’” *Dailymail.co.uk*, June 16, 2016, accessed April 28, 2017.

parties for being bigoted and xenophobic.<sup>41</sup> Lastly, the “leave” campaign produced a map showing five European countries with large Muslim populations that it claimed were being considered for EU membership (Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Turkey).<sup>42</sup> The map also highlighted nearby Syria and Iraq, where brutal conflicts have triggered a mass exodus of refugees to Europe.<sup>43</sup> Tim Farron, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, denounced the map as a “dog whistle” being used to spark anti-immigrant sentiment.<sup>44</sup> By using such provocative language and campaign materials, Farage and other “leave” leaders helped advance the claim that they sought to appeal to intolerant, excessively nostalgic voters.

In addition to the comments and tactics employed by prominent figures in the “leave” campaign, hate crimes and other incidents of racism committed after the referendum revealed that some “leave” voters were indeed motivated by xenophobia and a yearning for the past. For example, *The Guardian* reported that in the days following the vote, two Muslim women in East London had eggs thrown at them, an Italian man was punched for asking someone how he voted in the referendum, a halal butcher shop was firebombed, graffiti was sprayed on a Polish community center in London, and laminated cards reading, “Leave the EU: No more Polish Vermin,” were posted on mailboxes.<sup>45</sup> These incidents clearly show that a number of people who supported Brexit exhibited violent behavior toward immigrants and, after the “leave” campaign’s victory, felt emboldened to commit heinous acts.

Though polling is less useful in assessing the fourth possible determinant of Brexit than the previous three, the limited data available support the claims of this theory’s proponents,

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Ashley Cowburn, “EU Referendum: Brexit Campaign Accused of ‘Fanning Flames of Division’ with Controversial Map,” *Independent.co.uk*, June 6, 2016, accessed April 28, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Homa Khaleeli, “‘A Frenzy of Hatred’: How to Understand Brexit Racism,” *Theguardian.com*, June 29, 2016, accessed April 29, 2017.

especially regarding immigration. “Leave” voters’ responses to certain questions in two of the four surveys discussed in this analysis indicate animosity toward immigrants. As mentioned previously, the ComRes poll asked respondents how they would vote if the UK “wouldn’t have to accept Turkish immigrants” if Turkey “joined the EU.”<sup>46</sup> A significant group of people, 32 percent, said this would make them more likely to vote to leave the EU, which suggests that many Brexit supporters could hold xenophobic views.<sup>47</sup> The Lord Ashcroft poll, meanwhile, asked voters whether they viewed certain entities or phenomena as beneficial, harmful, or somewhere in between.<sup>48</sup> Eighty percent of “leave” voters saw immigration as a harmful development that was hurting the UK.<sup>49</sup> This finding reveals that Brexit supporters, even if they are tolerant toward immigrants, feel that immigration is changing British society in undesirable ways. As such, they desire a return to a simpler, more stable past. In sum, anecdotes about controversial campaign rhetoric, materials, and post-referendum hate crimes, as well as sparse polling data on immigration, demonstrate that a significant number of “leave” voters held xenophobic views and yearned for an idealized past.

### **Significance of Findings and Conclusion**

Based on analysis of the polling data and news media reports, the evidence provides considerable support for all four of the determinants investigated throughout this piece. The findings show that 1.) a majority of Brexit voters were older, less-educated, and of lesser means; 2.) individual Brexit voters strongly valued sovereignty over the economy and immigration; and 3.) desire for national control over these two policy issues were the largest drivers of the “leave” vote. Meanwhile, numerous incidents of controversial campaign rhetoric and tactics, as well as

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<sup>46</sup> “Daily Mail / ITV News – EU Referendum Survey,” 39.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Lord Ashcroft, “How the United Kingdom Voted on Thursday... And Why.”

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

hate crimes and limited polling data on immigration, give credence to the hypothesis that Brexit was the result of immigrant-fearing, nostalgic voters. All four determinants serve as credible explanations for why the shocking result of the Brexit referendum occurred. As such, scholars and media outlets of diverse political viewpoints each capture portions of the truth behind the event.

With all four arguments serving as partial explanations for why Brexit occurred, the thesis statement laid out at the beginning of this paper can now be evaluated. It predicts that the referendum result was caused by concerns regarding a number of issues, including sovereignty, national identity, economic frustration, and uneasiness about immigration. Comparing the thesis to the data, this argument appears to be as sound as the four other causes that were examined. Sovereignty was an overriding concern for “leave” voters, and the other factors were directly linked to it. National identity, economic frustration, and immigration were all subtopics of the sovereignty issue, indicating that it served as an outlet for numerous grievances. In addition, national identity and immigration were closely linked because the people who wanted to control immigration were likely not eager for other changes that would alter the fabric of society. The thesis of this essay, therefore, also serves as a credible explanation of what compelled the British, long wary of the European Union, to make the ultimate break and take a chance that a future outside the multinational body would be brighter than one inside it. The United Kingdom’s current path may be more uncertain, but the referendum showed that its citizens are willing to endure potential short-term pain in the hopes of long-term prosperity and security.

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