

INTRODUCTION

Undeniably, the last two decades have brought some of the most profound political and economic transformations to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Since June 2016, when the Brexit referendum was held, the UK has had five prime ministers, equal to the number who governed between 1979 and 2016, a span of 37 years.

Leaving the European Union, losing Queen Elizabeth II as its longest-reigning monarch, and discussing the possibility of independent Scotland or unified Ireland all might feel like seismic shifts. While it may be hard to point at any precise moment in British history which might have led to all these changes, we could perhaps reflect on some processes continuing over a long time, such as waves of decolonisation and democratisation leading to the dissolution of and disenchantment with the British Empire, and further questioning of British common political identities, or growing euro-scepticism and dissatisfaction with the direction taken by the European project.

The process of implementing Brexit coincided with other international and global crises. These included the COVID-19 pandemic, its economic and social impact, and Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, with all its geopolitical consequences. Such turbulent times call for more in-depth research that maps out the biggest challenges and guides our understanding of the current phenomena.

The first of such challenges is linked to the questions about the future of the UK constitutional system. The transfer of power to the devolved administrations (Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) and ongoing debates about the future of the monarchy and the centralisation of power carry profound implications. One of the latest developments in this area is the publication of the English Devolution White Paper, *Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth* in mid-December 2024.¹ This document has initiated a broad discussion on extending devolution in England and empowering local authorities.²

The second challenge pertains to the dynamics of international relations. In the context of a shifting global order, the UK is redefining its role as an international leader.

¹ "English Devolution White Paper," *Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government*, 16 December 2024, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>, 29 May 2025.

² A. Paun et al., "Nine Things We Learned from the English Devolution White Paper," *Institute for Government*, 17 December 2024, at <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/english-devolution-white-paper>, 29 May 2025.

A key element in the success of this strategy is establishing stable relationships with the European Union, the United States, and major partners in the Indo-Pacific region. Regarding European security, the UK's support for Ukraine in its war against Russia and its stance on emerging threats are critical to understanding the evolving security architecture in Europe.

The third challenge stems from social and cultural 'tectonic shifts'. British society is experiencing profound changes driven by migration, globalisation, demographic trends, and the influence of technology and social media on daily life. Anti-immigration rhetoric fuels the rise of populism and hinders the evidence-based debate on public policies.

Research into how these trends manifest in the UK's political system offers comparative insights into similar phenomena in other democracies. We aim to address these challenges in a UK-focused issue of *Politeja*, which we are pleased to present to you. The concept for this issue emerged during the international conference 'UK: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow. International Conference on Contemporary British Politics', organised on 23–24 November 2023 by the Institute of Political Science and International Relations of the Jagiellonian University and the Polish Research Centre of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Some of the articles present research from 2023 and some from 2024 which gives this issue a contemporary feeling while spanning the time of two governments.

The special issue of *Politeja* starts with articles on the role of the UK in the currently changing international sphere. The article by Elżbieta Stadtmüller aims to present the United Kingdom's approach to the changing global order, especially in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war (2022-2023). She employs a constructivist perspective to understand how the UK envisions the structure and values of the global order and what norms are promoted in the international discourse. The next article concentrates on the analysis of the shift in British foreign policy post-Brexit, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Justyna Eska-Mikołajewska strives to understand the strategic approach of Rishi Sunak's government and its implications for global British influence. Benjamin Martill and Alan Convery in their article on the Conservative Party's position on European integration seek to answer the question of how Conservative Euroscepticism has evolved since the 1990s. They explore the connection between decreasing responsibility for implementing policies and the increasing political radicalism of the Tories.

Robert Gawłowski provides insight into almost three decades of devolution reforms in the United Kingdom, using the context of a meta-governance approach. Adopting an institutional approach, Gawłowski analyses legal acts, parliamentary reports, but also interviews with the politicians engaged in reforms, underlining the challenges and underscoring the necessity of finding the proper answers to the devolution dilemmas. Łukasz Danel presents the uniqueness of the constitutional arrangements of the United Kingdom, drawing our attention again to the asymmetries of British devolution and, in particular, to the so-called West Lothian question. After discussing almost five decades of developments in this regard, Danel analyses how the discussions have been reinvigorated by the Brexit processes. The objective of Tomasz Czapiewski's article is

to analyse the political leadership of Nicola Sturgeon in Scotland. The study draws upon theories of political leadership to provide a multidimensional analysis of Sturgeon's tenure as the first female First Minister of Scotland, focusing on key areas such as healthcare, education, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and transportation, as well as her role in advancing Scottish independence. Grzegorz Mathea analyses differences in political visions and postulates in a deeply divided context of post-Brexit Northern Ireland. After presenting difficulties linked to avoiding the hard border on the island of Ireland while preserving the peace process power-sharing arrangements, he proceeds to analyse the attitudes of main Northern Ireland's parties towards the border issue, situating them in the historical, social and political framework.

The article by Elżbieta Sadowska-Wieczek concentrates on the reform regarding the local security in England and Wales. In 2011 the new authority, Police and Crime Commissioners, was established - responsible for setting local safety priorities, and has been equipped with relatively broad supervisory powers over the local police forces. The study aims to assess the main themes of the debate regarding the legitimacy of establishing the office of the Police and Crime Commissioner. Małgorzata Kułakowska aims to analyse the changes in census policies within the last three decades, focusing on census forms and identity-related questions. She argues that censuses should be seen as public policies, deeply embedded in the context of political struggles for recognition, not merely a mirror but a tool shaping understandings of social realities. Stephen Davies' article explores the understudied phenomenon of British citizens' experience in Poland, focusing on *the role of politics (...) as a factor in unforced migration*, drawing on a series of qualitative in-depth interviews. The analysis utilises the concepts of anomie but also agency (often shared within the couple) to illustrate the spectrum of choices faced by British citizens considering migration. Monika Banaś in her study of anti-migrant rhetoric in three political contexts: British, Irish, and Swedish, examines different faces of populism. She finds similarities in the main arguments and themes utilised in political discourse by politicians and commentators across different institutional, social and historical settings. One of the interesting aspects of Polish-UK relations in previous decades was academic cooperation. Radosław Rybkowski conducted a bibliometric study using the Scopus database, focusing on publications with both Polish and UK affiliations. The results show an increase in joint publications between Polish and UK researchers across various fields, particularly in medicine.

The article by Arkady Rzegocki, former ambassador of the Republic of Poland to Ireland, and the United Kingdom, emphasises the significance of personal narratives in fostering mutual understanding between nations and promoting cultural exchange. Through an exploration of the story of Constance Gore-Booth Markievicz and Kazimierz Dunin-Markiewicz, the Author demonstrates how their lives can serve as a cultural bridge between Poland and Ireland, encouraging deeper engagement with each country's traditions and values. This conceptualisation of personal stories as a form of soft power highlights the critical role of knowledge and empathy in shaping international relations.

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