**Perceptions of the EU/Brexit in Mexico**

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## This paper is a draft version of the paper for the upcoming book

## *External Perceptions of the EU after Brexit and their Impact on Foreign Policy*, edited by Chaban, Natalia; Niemann, Arne; Speyer, Johanna

**Introduction**

This paper aims to contribute to the extensive literature about the perceptions of the EU worldwide (Chaban, Niemann, and Speyer 2018) by focusing on what a specific location (Mexico) observes, perceives and interprets about a specific issue (Brexit). In particular, this paper inspects the perceptions of Mexican elites based on statements made by public officials, analysis published by scholars and the coverage and opinions of influential journalist regarding Brexit between 2016 and 2018. The main argument is that the perceptions of the EU/Brexit in Mexico have experienced a divergent trend: while Mexican perceptions about the Brexit process are overwhelmingly negative due to the potential disruptive effects on the European integration process, Mexican perceptions of the EU have tended to be positive (PPMI, NCRE, and NFG 2015a) and been largely focused on the conclusion of the modernization of the EU-Mexico association agreement in April 2018. The combination of Brexit and the new EU-Mexico agreement produces a parallel Mexican perception where the EU is undergoing a deep internal and negative transformation and, at the same time, remains a reliable international partner, particularly in contrast to the acrimonious relationship with the United States under the Trump administration. In this regard, from the Mexican policy making perspective, the main uncertainty of Brexit is how to retain a strong relationship with the United Kingdom at a time when a reinvigorated relationship with the EU is taking place. The argument of this paper is articulated in four sections. The first presents a brief overview of the general trends in the relationship between Mexico and the EU as well as between Mexico and the United Kingdom. The second section reviews previous studies about the perceptions of the EU in Mexico, and the premises of the analysis in this paper based on an elite perception analysis. The third section examines the main perceptions of scholars and media outlets about the Brexit vote and the following ‘period of uncertainty’, and categorizes them in seven images. Finally, it follows the review of the current and potential public policy strategies to address the relationship between Mexico and the United Kingdom in the context of the Brexit and closes with final reflections.

**1. The Context of the Mexico-EU/UK Relationship**

A simultaneous strategy of Mexican foreign policy toward the EU, on the one hand, and toward the United Kingdom, on the other, is emerging and will guide the design and the implementation of Mexican policies in Europe for the foreseeable future. Contingent on the final negotiation of Brexit, some policy areas might overlap if the EU-UK were to find an agreement to collaborate in the making and implementation of European policies in Latin America and Mexico. In some other cases, a sharp division between the EU and the UK, as legally differentiated entities, will shape the rationale of the relationship between Mexico and Europe. While the evaluation of the impact of Brexit in the Mexico-Europe relationship will be observed only after 2019, some preliminary information indicates that the impact has been and will continue to be limited, particularly in the areas of trade, investment and diplomacy.

Regarding trade, the United Kingdom was the 17th ranked worldwide trade partner of Mexico and the 5th amongst EU member states in 2017 (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores 2018). Bilateral trade has experienced significant growth in the past decade, particularly as a consequence of increasing Mexican exports to the UK. From 2006 to 2016, bilateral exchanges grew by 75 per cent, reaching 5.3 billion dollars in 2016. During this period, Mexican exports jumped from 925 million dollars in 2006 to 3.2 billion in 2016, while the imports from the United Kingdom hovered around 2.1 billion during the same period. While it is premature to suggest an emergent trend or strong causation as a result of Brexit, there is a correlation between the vote for Brexit and a drop in total trade from 5.3 billion in 2016 to 4.7 billion in 2017, which was produced mostly from Mexican exports decreasing in one billion dollars and the UK’s exports growing for about 300 million (Secretaria de Economia 2018).

British investment in Mexico has been a priority area of the bilateral relationship. The UK is the 8th largest investor in Mexico and some of the most notable British companies in Mexico include Rolls-Royce and British Petroleum (Secretaria de Economia 2016a). As of the end of 2018, the flow of investment had not experienced any major disruption and the magnet to the UK’s investment in Mexico continued to be first and foremost the domestic economic environment in Mexico. However, the potential changes in the regionalization in North America could also bring new obstacles and challenges to the British investment in Mexico. After threatening with unilaterally withdrawing from the 24-year-old North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Administration of President Donald Trump renegotiated NAFTA with Mexico and Canada, signing the agreement in November 2018. From the perspective of the EU and the UK, the changes produced by the renegotiated NAFTA will require reexamining the investment and trade opportunities in Mexico. In this regard, after the vote for Brexit, both parties have followed up the flow of investment and particularly high ranking UK officials such as Liam Fox, Secretary of State for International Trade, have visited Mexico (Lazareff 2017).

Investment in the oil sector is one of the priorities for both parties (Webber 2018). British Petroleum (BP) participates in three offshore projects and in so-called ‘open season’ rights to surplus capacity on several natural gas pipelines owned by Pemex. BP also launched Mexico’s first foreign-branded gas station, with plans to open 1,500 stations by 2022. The first station opened just outside Mexico City in March 2017 (Garcia 2017). On the other hand, the Anglo-Dutch company Royal Dutch Shell positioned itself as the biggest player in deep water exploration in Mexico in 2018. Since a landmark reform in 2013, which opened Mexico’s oil and gas sector to foreign investment, Shell has obtained a total of nine contracts — four independent, four in partnership with Qatar Petroleum, the world’s largest liquefied natural gas producer, and one in alliance with Pemex, Mexico’s state oil company (Webber 2018).

On the diplomatic front, even before the vote for Brexit in 2016, Mexico and the United Kingdom celebrated the “Dual Year”[[1]](#footnote-1) in 2015, which aimed to strengthen bilateral relations within the spheres of culture, academics, business and tourism. Additionally, Mexico President Enrique Peña Nieto conducted a state visit to the United Kingdom in March 2015 and also to Brussels to head the VII Mexico-EU Summit in June in 2015 (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores 2015).

The United Kingdom represents a mere segment of a dynamic relationship between Mexico and the EU. In 2017, total trade in goods between Mexico and the EU reached 61.7 billion euros (approximately 70.7 billion dollars as of August 2018) in comparison to the approximately 4.1 billion euros (4.7 billion dollars) between Mexico and the UK (DG for Trade 2018). From a wider perspective, the relationship between UK and Mexico also takes place within the EU-Mexico institutional and legal framework, which facilitates free trade in goods and services, investment, political cooperation and sectoral dialogues. More precisely, the EU and Mexico signed the Economic Partnership, Political Coordination and Cooperation Agreement (Global Agreement) in 1997. In light of the transformations in the regional and international context, Mexico and the EU reviewed the original GA and renegotiated the areas that could expand the benefits of the bilateral relationship. In April 2018, both parties concluded the negotiations for the modernization of a new GA (European Commission 2018). In this regard, contingent on the Brexit negotiations, the UK and Mexico will eventually need to prevent potential disruptions and create new mechanisms of cooperation in areas such as trade or investment that currently use the institutions and legal frameworks of the GA.

A wave of International Conservatism gathered fresh momentum after the 2007-2009 Great Recession and emerged progressively as a result of multiple elements including the secular stagnation, enduring conflicts and unseen dimensions of migrants (Foer 2017). The vote in favor of Brexit is emblematic of a larger trend of nationalist and conservative approaches. In some cases, such as the United States, Brexit synergized this shift. In the case of Mexico, the election of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in 2018 produced a political and economic environment embedded in a neo-populist flavored mix of views embracing free market, inclusion of social movements and pragmatism in the negotiation with different sectors of Mexican elites, all elements far away from the mindset of Brexit followers or provincialist views of the unconditional supporters of President Trump. All in all, the impact of Brexit on the relationship between Mexico and the UK remains mostly focused on the recalibration of institutional and legal frameworks, while the economic and political trends remain stable or with limited changes. In the case of the EU-Mexico relationship, the prospects point towards a deepening in the mechanisms of cooperation in most of the areas of the bilateral relationship as a result of the modernization of the GA and the first signals of Lopez Obrador administration (2018-2024) to embrace and reinforce the relationship with the EU.

**2. Mexican Perceptions of the EU: Background and Analytical Framework**

Geography is destiny even in times of globalization. A wide range of issues in the decision-making processes in Mexican foreign policy include the shared history and border linkages with the United States. Europe has been an alternative source of ideas, institutional practices and business opportunities that provide Mexico with some elements to balance, reject and enrich its geopolitical reality. Consequently, Mexican elites (policymakers, scholars and opinion makers) are by and large more attentive to the most immediate effect of the events occurring in the United States in comparison to the ones taking place in Europe and the EU. Nevertheless, when Europe is isolated as an object study, the share of the elite that follows the EU is relatively well-informed about the challenges of the integration process that Europe faces on daily basis.

Against this background, studies about the perceptions of Europe or the EU in Mexico are limited to general questions across different time frames or unsystematic questioning raised in particular junctures. As part of broader studies, a handful of academic papers have contributed to describe and explain how Mexico or Mexicans see Europe and the EU (Chanona 2009, Dominguez 2011). More recently, the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics (Costa Vaz), which conducts surveys about Mexican foreign policy, has included a few questions regarding EU/European perceptions in their surveys of opinions among the Mexican general public and leaders (González *et al*. 2013, Maldonado *et al*. 2016). In 2015, the study *Analysis of the Perception of the EU and EU’s Policies Abroad* made a significant contribution to the understanding of perceptions of the ten EU Strategic Partner countries, which included Mexico (PPMI, NCRE, and NFG 2015a). Based on the data collected for the 2015 project mentioned (newspapers, public opinion and elite perceptions), Chaban and Holland (2019) led a project for tracking and enhancing the perceptions of the EU around the world and three findings regarding Mexico and Brexit are pertinent for this paper (Dominguez 2019).

Regarding press analysis, first finding, the evaluation of coverage of EU news in the Mexican outlets selected for analysis in the 2015 study tended to be critical about the challenges Europe faced during the time of scrutiny.[[2]](#footnote-2) The evaluation of the articles indicates that about one-third of EU news fell into the neutral/negative and negative categories. This trend is consequential with the challenging events that took place in Europe: political disruptions (Brexit vote), economic underperformance (Greek chronic economic crisis) and human tragedies (unprecedented migration and its human death toll). The second key finding comes from the survey of public opinion in Mexico (undertaken in 2015, in the same study). It indicated that 66.2 per cent of the Mexican respondents considered very likely (35.2 per cent) and rather likely (37.7 per cent) a global leadership of the EU[[3]](#footnote-3) (PPMI, NCRE, and NFG 2015b). The third main finding indicates that the evaluation of the EU in the eyes of the Mexican elite respondents,[[4]](#footnote-4) correlated to public opinion. One of the potential explanations for this nuance in Mexican perceptions is that while the EU faces multiple crises, the Mexican government and society filter the immediacy of news through preconceived perceptions of Europe and the EU as the location of inclusive societies that have overcome political and economic adversity throughout history. The survey of public opinion mentioned above found that the EU was most commonly described as *multicultural* (38.1 per cent)and *modern* (34 per cent), and least often described as *hypocritical* (7.3 per cent)or *aggressive* (8.3 per cent) (PPMI, NCRE, and NFG 2015b: 56). This is particularly in contrast to the most pragmatic and full-fledged free market and individualistic model of US capitalism (Dominguez 2019).

Against this background, this paper focuses on the Mexican perceptions of the Brexit process. Building on previous studies, the complex mosaic of images of the EU as a foreign partner for Mexico is shaped by a complex set of factors, with leading news media being among the most influential, due to their role in selecting, spreading and interpreting messages about foreign policy priorities defined by administrations and elites. The process is far from linear: a symbiotic, contesting and often competing relationship is developed between government officials and public opinion, one the one hand, and mass media, on the other. As indicated by Chaban and Holland (2019), the cascading activation framing theory ([Entman 2004](#_ENREF_7)) explains this process by tracing how foreign policy-related information is spread and activated in a given society. In this regard, this paper responds to the mail goal of this volume that is “locking in” one *issue* – looming Brexit –from different *locations* – Mexico, and under a diversity of theoretical assumptions—cascading activation framing theory (Chaban, Niemann, and Speyer 2019).

In order to meet the main goal of this volume, the paper gathered information from Mexican public officials, scholars and opinion makers published in press releases, speeches, scholarly journals and newspapers during the period 2016-2018. Based on a qualitative analysis, one of challenges was the limited presence of Brexit in the Mexican public administration[[5]](#footnote-5), scholarly[[6]](#footnote-6) and media[[7]](#footnote-7) debates. While some peaks in the flow of information derived from significant events in the Brexit process, declarations of public officials were scare, scholarly documents took some time to react in academic fora, and only a handful of journalists, mostly Mexican correspondents, followed Brexit in a more systematic fashion. While the survey of the information gathered is not exhaustive and may be limited from a quantitative and comprehensive perspective, the selection is representative of the most significant participants in shaping the perceptions of the Brexit and the EU. The following section elaborates the main narratives categorized into seven broad images of the Brexit process in Mexico in the “period of uncertainty” – years of negotiations after the “Leave” vote and before the actual exit of the UK from the EU.

**3. Seven Images of the EU in Mexico in Times of Brexit**

The analysis of academic and media discourses, as well as statements from government officials in this paper, conveys images, understood as mental pictures (Chaban, Elgström, and Gulyaeva 2016). Regarding the Brexit process, the mosaic of images is rather more varied amongst scholars and journalists than government officials. Rather predictably, the latter group has been cautious and diplomatic about expressing their views on Brexit. Data collected demonstrated that in the period of reflection triggered by the Brexit vote EU perceptions among Mexican elites can be categorized into three clusters. The first group encloses images and narratives that largely define the Brexit process as a source of uncertainty, and, implicitly and explicitly, project images of fragility and weakness in the UK mostly and to lesser extent in the EU. The second set of images is associated with the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. Here, provincialism and, to some extent, manipulation of the rationale of the decision are dominant images. The third set of images has emerged as a result of the evolution of the Brexit negotiations. From the Mexican perspective, the EU has projected resilience and reliance in the negotiations with the United Kingdom and reassurances that the Global Agreement with Mexico would be unaffected by the Brexit.

One of the most common images is related to uncertainty, thus this section starts with this vision. Undeniably, the Brexit vote and the implementation of Article 50 are main sources of uncertainty. Nonetheless, different elite cohorts seem to perceive different levels of uncertainty. Mexican public officials tended to refer to Brexit as a complex process that would have a limited effect on Mexico. **In the aftermath of the Brexit vote,** Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) explained that Mexico had taken measures to prevent further turbulence, particularly in reference to the immediate financial effect of the Brexit vote. He also considered that the potential effect would be moderate because the United Kingdom accounts for just one percent of Mexican trade (Presidencia de la República 2016). Business groups have barely made public statements regarding Brexit. One example of such a reaction was focused on financial instability: the President of the Coordinating Business Council (CCE acronym in Spanish), Juan Pablo Castañón, called for efficient public spending and avoiding raising interest rates in Mexico in order to deal with the financial speculation derived from the departure of Great Britain from the European Union (*El Universal* 2016). Along the same lines of uncertainty, some speculations were related to the potential option of the UK joining NAFTA, an option rapidly discarded due to the tensions in the renegotiation of NAFTA (Bugarin 2017c). In contrast to the political and business elites, Mexican academic experts have adopted a more critical evaluation of the uncertainty produced by the Brexit process. One of the scholars argued that the United Kingdom had sailed to unknown waters without navigational instruments and that the true cost of Brexit goes far beyond the probable purely commercial and financial losses (Sberro Picard 2018).

Beyond immediate crises, Brexit has also been perceived as a catalyst of deep-seated tensions between the EU and the UK. This can increase European fragility, the second image identified in this section. By the time the EU celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, Bugarin (2017d) argued that the EU seemed to have lost the compass since 2008, when the economic and financial crisis broke out. It was forced to promote a policy of austerity that reduced its popularity. However, the EU’s insufficient actions to deal with ongoing problems such a migration or economic growth, often are linked to the behavior or commitment of member states. As the negotiation process for leaving the EU moved forward, the image of fragility has been more associated with the UK than with the EU. In the eyes of Mexican observers, the June 2016 Brexit vote left a polarized country on several fronts. First appeared the territorial/nationalist dispute. Scotland *wants nothing to do with* leaving the EU, and its Government ponders to repeat the independence referendum of 2014. Northern Ireland, which voted divided, sees its peace process threatened after Sinn Féin announced that it would also ask for independence. Then comes the demographic divide: lower education, lower income and older people tend to support Brexit vis-a-vis the British young, cosmopolitan and educated workforce involved in the economy based on the external sector, knowledge and finance supports EU membership (Ruano 2018).

The Brexit process has projected an image of weakness, the third image of analysis. This image, similar to fragility, has evolved since June 2016. The first reaction after the vote was that Brexit was the worst nightmare of the EU and market volatility became a reality (Torres 2016). Over time, financial markets stabilized and the center of weakness moved from the European Union to the United Kingdom. Particularly, Theresa May and the position of the UK in the Brexit negotiations were perceived as weak, and were the subject of numerous criticisms. Navarrete (2017) stated that “A list of the contradictions and inaccuracies incurred by Prime Minister Theresa May would be as long as the catalog of Trump's lies in his first half year of (un) government.” At the same time, after several rounds of negotiations between Michel Barnier, European Chief Negotiator for the United Kingdom Exiting the European Union, and David Davis, UK Brexit Secretary (2016-2018), Mexican print press highlighted that the UK had made most of the concessions, particularly in two areas. The first was that the British accepted the terms of settlement of their debts, that some called reparations, and which include overdue or deferred payments and future contributions already planned. The second was admitting that, after March 2019 and at least during a transitional period of two, three or four years, the United Kingdom would remain subject to various aspects of European legislation. A Mexican political analyst argued, “This drink has been very bitter for the radical Europhobes” (Navarrete 2017). The perception of weakness of the May government was also highlighted in the case of the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal. Guerra Cabrera (2018) asserted that “Hardly censured in her own party for her lousy handling of the Brexit and desperate to flee from the internal discredit that has caused, May saw in the poisoning of the Skripal the most succulent escape door to its internal crisis” as she did not hesitate to blame Russia three weeks after the chemical attack, although Scotland Yard has said that the investigation would take the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPAC) many months (Guerra Cabrera 2018).

While not devoid of contradictions, the EU has been perceived as an entity embracing liberal values and encouraging globalization. In contrast, the decision of the UK to leave the EU was perceived by Mexican scholars and journalists as the triumph of provincialism over globalization, the fourth image of this section. Mexican public officials have not conveyed any statements reflecting concerns about provincialist views, but academics and media commentators insisted upon it. Ruano (2018) argued that the most profound blow of Brexit is the symbolic one: the victory of the xenophobic, global-phobic, conservative, anti-intellectual right. Brexit is conceived as an inflection point in the European integration process that reenergizes nationalism and exacerbates the role of extreme right-wing candidates. Several analyses indicated the potential source of inspiration of Nigel Farage, the main promoter of the British referendum, and Brexit for other Europhobic forces in the continent: Geert Wilders (Netherlands), Marine Le Pen (Duina) and Matteo Salvini (Italy) (Andreu 2016). Mexican commentators also noted how the extreme right in Germany reached representation in the Bundestag for the first time: the Alternative for Germany party reached more than 5 per cent of the threshold needed to enter the Bundestag, thus obtaining 10.7 per cent, and with this reached 94 seats in the Bundestag (Pérez Mondragón 2018). From the Mexican perspective, the provincialism embraced by politicians beyond the confines of Europe was a matter of concern, particularly in light of the election of Donald Trump. His presidential campaign sympathized with Brexit and adapted some similar strategies: the perceived threat of immigration, Mexicans and, above all, Muslims; the idea of replacing "free trade" with "fair trade"; and the promise to reduce unemployment and improve the health system, among others. In sum, populist provincialist statements, sometimes without real bases, seek to instill fear in the population to win votes (Bade Rubio 2016).

Brexit was also associated with the image of manipulation, the fifth in this analysis. The scaremongering tactics of Nigel Farage heralded perceptions of manipulation of information about the role of the EU in British politics. On the other hand, the European Union was used to manipulate public opinion, as did the Leave campaign when Boris Johnson, Foreign Affairs Minister (2016-2018), promised to allocate the supposed 350 million pounds of the weekly contribution to the Union budget to finance the public health system, or the promises to stop immigration into the country to prevent foreigners from benefiting from national public services. Perhaps the most effective tool used against the European Union was the argument that “everything is the fault of Brussels” (Bade Rubio 2016). Along the same lines, Jean Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, emphasized that the Brexit was the result of a campaign undertaken by the United Kingdom against the EU (Bugarin 2017e).As the news of data manipulation and political campaigns in Brexit and United States circulated around the world, the Mexican Institute of Transparency, Access to Information and Protection of Personal Data (INAI) carried out an investigation on the companies that may be involved in the *Cambridge Analytica* case. The president of INAI, Francisco Javier Acuña, emphasized that the investigation was opened *ex officio* to avert potential actions of massive manipulation of personal data, as “we now know was used in the Brexit referendum and in the election of Donald Trump in the United States”. Then Mexican concern was regarding the 2018 elections in Mexico and the fact that “If it happens in countries that boast more democratic behavior, such as England (with Brexit), nobody can rule out that any party has concerns or encouragement to do something similar” (Camacho Servín 2018).

The sixth image is resilience. An interesting image comes from the capacity of the EU to adapt to the new circumstances of Brexit and move forward without the UK. During the negotiations for Brexit, the EU has often been able to reach common fronts regarding specific topics. For instance, the Mexican press reported that Joseph Muscat, the prime minister of Malta and head of the six-month EU presidency, said there is unanimity among the 27 members regarding the migratory paper and said that they will apply the principle of reciprocity to London. He stated that the aspiration is the similar treatment for all EU citizens and not their differentiation, as proposed by May (Bugarin 2017a). On the other hand, the reform of EU institutions after Brexit captured the attention of Mexican scholars. In the case of the European Parliament, Perez Mondragon (2018) examined the debates about the new distribution of seats after Brexit. In principle, thirteen countries[[8]](#footnote-8) will keep the same number of seats, nine countries[[9]](#footnote-9) will increase one more representative, while Italy and the Netherlands will obtain three more deputies, and Spain and France will have five more representatives in the Parliament (Pérez Mondragón 2018).

The image of resilience of the EU was also present. Bugarin (2017b) reported in the Mexican press that if the objective of the Brexit promoters was to reverse the crisis of confidence in the European Union, they are achieving it. In his view, everything seems to indicate that the divorce process, far from dividing the EU citizens, is causing them to close ranks around the European project, even within the United Kingdom. According to the European Parliament poll released on October 2017, 55 per cent of Britons believed that their country had benefited from belonging to the EU, while 27 per cent thought otherwise (Bugarin 2017b). Following such a trend, Mexican press reported that civil society in the UK is developing a citizen and political movement around Brexit that seeks to avoid the separation of the European Union, given the impact that its eventual consolidation would mean. Under the name of “Renew” and inspired by the “The Republic in March” movement of French President Emmanuel Macron, this political organization is gaining support from citizens who are turning their backs on traditional parties, promoting independent candidates with a strong anti-government message (Zurita Eraña 2018).

The seventh and last image is the one of reliance. The EU has projected an image of a reliable actor in Mexico for the past three decades. Since the early 1990s, Mexico and the EU have experienced a convergence of economic and political views allowing the implementation of the bilateral Global Agreement and innovative forms of cooperation with third parties, namely EU-Mexico coordination of cooperation to Central America, for instance. The image of EU reliance has been reinforced by the animosity of the Trump administration against Mexico in the areas of trade and migration. In other words, in spite of the detrimental effects of Brexit on the EU, the image of the EU as a trustworthy partner in Mexico is by and large explained by the convergence of endogenous, exogenous and global factors. In this regard, the conclusion of the modernization of the association agreement has offset partially the negative images of the Brexit. While the negotiation of the Global Agreement entailed conflicting interests, both parties moved forward to findcommon ground during negotiations, in contrast to the renegotiation of NAFTA which not only has produced polarized negotiations, but also tensions that were vented in the public arena. The conclusion of the Global Agreement provided an image of reliance since the new agreement includes economic, political and cooperation components that contrast to the UK position of trade negotiations. This entails a deepening of the relationship with the EU, while the mindset of Brexit/UK is perceived as more inclined to side with the rational of action of the Trump administration on a myriad of issue-areas ranging from migration to trade (Sberro Picard 2018).

**4. Public Policy Strategies and Images: Transmission Belts?**

The seven images entail perceptions that to greater or lesser extent are linked to the decisions and actions in the EU’s and the UK’s public policies. The ‘transmission belt’ between images and policies is far from straightforward, but to some extent it develops a feedback loophole. Three inquiries or lines of reasoning may shed some light about the scope of the perceptions of the EU in Mexico in times of Brexit and the current and potential trends in the diplomatic relations of Mexico with the UK and the EU.

The first is regarding the main elements that shape Mexican perceptions about Brexit in the context of the EU-Mexico relationship. **Three main factors shape Mexican perceptions, as it is suggested in the Introduction (Chaban, Niemann, and Speyer 2019) and some papers of this volume (Hurrelmann 2019);** exogenous, endogenous and global**. Exogenous factors are derived from EU actions. Mexican elites follow the challenges the EU is facing in areas such as Brexit, migration or economic growth as well as the transformations in policies such as trade, aid or democracy promotion, which produce a more tangible impact on Mexico. Two examples reveal the perceptions of EU-specific policies. In the 1990s, the EU sponsored civil society organizations and electoral observers, producing some animosity within the Mexican government. In the 2000s, changes in EU external aid policies were subject to criticism in Mexico in the light of the fact that some middle-income countries would receive less EU economic resources. Endogenous factors, the second group of factors, are Mexico-specific. They include, among others, Mexican political culture that filters external events and the way Mexico should address them. As Mexico revisited its political strategies in the late 2000s and started a transition from an economic approach based on state-oriented strategies to open regionalism and trade agreements on the one hand, and from a dominant party to a multiparty electoral competition on the other, the Mexican government found in the EU several avenues of political and economic collaboration. The positive perception of the association agreement and the open dialogue with European institutions is emblematic of the transformations of the Mexican political culture to address the relationship with the EU. The third factor that shapes Mexican perceptions is the role of the United States in the economic and political calculations in the making of Mexican foreign policy. The turn to nationalist/nativist approaches under the Trump administration has exacerbated the disagreements between the United States and Mexico and reinforced the shared perspectives between the European Union and Mexico.**

The second inquiry or line of reasoning is regarding the foreign policy options in the post-Brexit era. From this angle, the relationship Mexico-UK has reached new levels of cooperation and a cautious approach has been adopted by both parties in order to deal with the ongoing uncertainties produced by the Brexit vote. **Mexican and British officials have issued statements or met regularly with their counterparts after the “Leave” vote. In** September 2016, the Secretary of Finance and Public Credit, José Antonio Meade Kuribreña, and the general director of Petróleos Mexicanos, José Antonio González Anaya, held several meetings with investors, financial analysts, legislators and government representatives in London (SHCP-Pemex 2016). **In November 2016, the Secretary of the Economy of Mexico, Ildefonso Guajardo Villarreal and the Minister of State for Trade Policy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Mark Ian Price met to explore new mechanisms to increase bilateral trade. In this context, they confirmed the high level of trade and investment relations, as well as the mutual interest in deepening them. They also recognized that the celebration of the Dual Year Mexico-United Kingdom in 2015 helped to boost this relationship. They also highlighted the role played by the business communities of both countries, through the work of the High-Level Business Group for the promotion of investments and commercial exchange (Secretaria de Economia 2016b).**

UK officials also reinforced the spirit of cooperation with Mexico. In March 2017, Duncan Taylor, the UK Ambassador to Mexico, indicated that both situations, Brexit and the possible “Mexit” (Mexico's exit from NAFTA), would give both countries the opportunity to "establish links in all areas of economic growth, especially in the energy and manufacturing sectors such as automotive". Also, Ambassador Taylor emphasized that in the tourism sector, according to figures from the UK Embassy in Mexico, half a million English citizens visited Mexico and around 85,000 Mexicans visited Great Britain each year (Montenegro 2017). Later, the UK's International Trade Secretary, Liam Fox, visited Mexico in July 2017 to launch discussions for a post-Brexit deal as part of Britain's ongoing efforts to secure its trading future outside of the EU. Fox met with Mexico's Minister of the Economy Ildefonso Guajardo Villarreal to discuss continuing trade cooperation between the two countries once Britain leaves the EU and discussed the potential for a future trade deal. EU rules stipulate that member states cannot negotiate independent trade deals while part of the union. However, the UK is allowed to hold preliminary discussions ahead of its departure in March 2019 (Gilchrist 2017).

The third inquiry of this section is to what extent the Mexican perceptions of Brexit impact the EU’s legitimacy, credibility and/or coherence. This paper has shown that the Brexit process and the EU have been perceived from two different angles: the former has been dominantly negative while the latter has been neutral and positive. From a public policy perspective, the link between Brexit and the modernization of the EU-Mexico association agreement entails some challenges contingent on whether Brexit will be “hard” or “soft”. The prospect of a “soft” Brexit would have allowed the UK to make use of the platform of the modernized EU-Mexico Global Agreement, in which the EU could have access to previously restricted Mexican sectors, such as energy, maritime services and air transport, as well as to a more open agri-food sector that is committed to eliminating tariffs on pasta, chocolates, blue cheeses, apples and canned peaches. Yet, the “hard” Brexit has gained track. In this scenario, the UK will need to recover part of the potential trade deviation produced by the EU-Mexico Global Agreement, while also discussing some of the areas that are covered by the association agreement, but may be included in the UK-Mexico post-Brexit negotiation (such as labor rights and environment). Another country that could potentially use the EU-Mexico Global Agreement to its benefit is Ireland: as a result of the hard Brexit and the close trade relationship with the UK, Ireland can find in the EU-Mexico Global Agreement a substitute for Irish exports to the UK after March 2019 (Bugarin 2018).

**Conclusions**

Brexit, recurrent recessions, institutional tensions, emerging euro-populism and the problematic accommodation of new migrants are some examples of crises that tarnish and affect the perceptions of the EU within and outside Europe. In spite of these and other recurrent crises, as some previous studies mentioned in the first section of this paper indicate, Mexican perceptions tend to offset the inherent crises of Europe with the image that stresses the benefits of the EU model. Hence, the dominant perception of the EU in Mexico tends to be neutral and, to a lesser degree, positive: Mexican society still associates Europe/the EU with inclusiveness, high living standards and a model of development which is more human- rather than market-oriented. In other words, the long-term historical positive perceptions of Europe are still able to ameliorate the negative news emanating from the most recent events in the EU as reported by the media.

This paper examined Mexican elite discourses – academic, media and public policy -- to analyze what main perceptions of the Brexit process are in place and how they affect the larger understanding of the EU. While the Brexit is emblematic of ‘bad news’ for the European project, Mexican elites have gradually evolved and been able to separate – at least in their perspectives and analyses -- the Brexit process and the deeper ties with the EU and even with the United Kingdom after Brexit. The explanation lies largely in the collision between the negative news inherent to Brexit, on the one hand, and the current state of the relationship between Mexico and the EU/UK, on the other. By the end of the 2018, the modernized EU-Mexico GA was under process of ratification and conveyed a positive image of the EU as a reliable and resilient partner in times of democratic recession and relative skepticism for free markets. What remains contingent to type of Brexit is the recalibration of institutional and legal frameworks that will guide the relationship between Mexico and the UK, which is quite strong and has not shown any type of potential disruptions.

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1. This diplomatic mechanism is called Dual Year because both governments decided to celebrate in 2015 the “Mexico’s Year in the United Kingdom” and “UK’s Year in Mexico”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The database used here for analysis draws on two popular prestigious papers (*El Universal* and *La Jornada)* and one business newspaper (*El Financiero)*, whichwere monitored daily between April 1 – June 30 2015, reviewing 551 articles related to the EU [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Based on the answers of options “Very likely” and “Rather likely” to survey Q5: In your opinion, how likely or unlikely is it that each of the following countries or organisations will take a strong leadership in world affairs five years from now? (PPMI, NCRE, and NFG 2015b: 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The number of elite interviewees was 17 (Academia/ Think Tank (4), Policy-makers (3), Media (Alianza para la Sociedad de la Información 2), Civil Society/ NGOs (RDP Antena 1), Business (5), Youth (Alianza para la Sociedad de la Información 2)) and were conducted in three phases between June and August 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Only a few members of the Peña Nieto Administration barely provided statements about Brexit, which were very general regarding the position of Mexico. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. While the subject of Brexit was included in some academic conferences, scholarly publications were limited to a few journals such as *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica* or *Comercio Exterior.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The survey included the review of the news and op-eds of the following print media outlets: *El Universal*, *La Jornada*, and *Milenio.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Germany, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Slovenia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal and the Czech Republic [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Slovakia, Estonia, Finland, Poland, Romania, and Sweden [↑](#footnote-ref-9)