The UK and the EU – an ambiguous relationship

On account of its geography as well as its history of wars, empire and the resulting immigration, the UK has always had a rather ambiguous relationship with the EU. Although Winston Churchill was among the great
5 visionaries of a peaceful, united Europe, Britain did not join the European Community until 1973. During the following decades, many British politicians eagerly defended national sovereignty and pushed for financial privileges, with Margaret Thatcher famously claiming "I want my
10 money back" in the 1980s.

Anti-EU rhetoric has been popular both in tabloids and in political debates for a long time. In 1993 UKIP (UK Independent Party) was founded. Its supporters generally want British independence from the EU, portraying the EU
15 as a threat to British sovereignty and identity.

Their rhetoric hit the nerve of those Britons who were afraid of losing their national sovereignty and cultural heritage in a time of globalisation and mass immigration.

Fear of losing the national heritage of the once great
20 British Empire played a central role in the UK's repeated refusal to adopt the euro.

Facing Euroscepticism and harsh criticism of his policies, PM David Cameron set a date for a referendum to gauge the people's support of the EU. After months of heated
25 parliamentary debates, the referendum was held on June 23, 2016, with 51.9% of the votes in favour of leaving the EU.

Support of leaving the EU was especially high in England, whereas 62% of Scots voted in favour of
30 remaining in the EU. This raised the possibility of Scotland holding a separate referendum to decide if it would stay in the EU, even if the rest of the UK left the union. Britain's exit would certainly mean the end of the UK's membership in the EU, yet it is neither the end of the world, nor the end
35 of Britain's role in Europe. The BREXIT could be regarded as a caesura in British and European politics, potentially offering chances for new beginnings.

In British politics, the outcome of the referendum led to a political earthquake. PM David Cameron resigned, as did his major opponent, UKIP leader Nigel Farage. The actual 40 BREXIT has to be managed by Cameron's successor, Conservative PM Theresa May, who appointed David Davis as "Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union". His job is to negotiate the conditions of the BREXIT with the EU. 45

On a European level, the referendum had tremendous consequences. First of all, British politicians were no longer invited to EU summits and many politicians from other EU-member states asked for a clear cut from Britain. Also, the BREXIT debate spurred new discussions about other 50 countries leaving the EU as well as general questions about the future of the EU.

Uncertainty spread to the European level, as the future of the EU may be at stake. At the same time, the redefinition of the EU-UK relations is yet to be negotiated 55 – will Britons soon need a visa to travel and work in the EU? Will a new free trade agreement replace EU free trade? How will BREXIT affect the economy and the labour market in the UK?

Uncertainty about the concrete results of BREXIT caused 60 some Britons to question the referendum. Apparently, quite a few voters regarded it more as a domestic affair and a chance to protest against Cameron's politics, giving little thought to the actual consequences.

After initial calls for a quick "divorce" made the 65 headlines, formal negotiations between the UK and the EU are set to begin in 2017, when the actual conditions of BREXIT will be finalised. However, it can certainly be said that BREXIT will mark the beginning of a new era in what will always remain an ambiguous relationship. 70