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# Brazil's perceptions of the EU after Brexit: a weaker but desirable partner

**Elena Lazarou, Bruno Theodoro Luciano and Tatiana Coutto**

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## Abstract

This chapter aims to assess how the Brexit process may have affected the perceptions of the EU by Brazilian political, intellectual and entrepreneurial elites, as well as by the mainstream online and print media. Speeches and reports are collected from the Brazilian government's official websites, while media content is obtained through the Nexis database. The analysis is supported by semi-structured interviews with diplomatic officials in London and Brussels. Particular attention is paid to the following dimensions due to their saliency in the Brazil-EU agenda: economic/trade; migration/development; and political/security. Preliminary results suggest that Brazilian narratives of the EU are linked to the benefits of regionalism and the perception of the EU as a global (trade) power. Results contribute to a better understanding of how Brexit is reported to Brazilian audiences, and which narratives about the "new EU-27" are either reinforced or deconstructed due to the UK's decision to leave the Union. The working hypothesis – that Brexit has not significantly changed the perception of the EU among Brazilian elites and media apart from the trade aspects – is by and large confirmed.

## Introduction

Brazil was among the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1960, yet it was not until the 1990s that the relationship gained momentum thanks to the adoption of liberalizing policies on both sides of the Atlantic and the strengthening of EU external competences after the adoption of the Treaty of Maastricht. The beginning of the 21st century represented another landmark in Brazil-EU relations: a growing economy and participation in various multilateral arrangements provided Brazil with the credibility to be regarded by investors and foreign governments as a responsible partner as well as an attractive market (Arraes 2005). Benefiting from the stability brought about by President Cardoso's monetary and fiscal policy (Treisman 2004), Workers' Party (PT) leader Lula da Silva (2003–2010) pursued an affirmative agenda that sought to increase Brazil's foothold in the international system by diversifying partners

and vocalizing the concerns of other developing countries (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2007). Within that context, the EU appeared as an important destination for Brazilian exports, and a potential supporter of Lula's social agenda (Euractiv 2014).

Meanwhile, the 2004 enlargement reinforced the view of the EU as both an economic and normative power (Manners 2002). The need to devise foreign policy guidelines for countries that did not have the perspective of joining the Union motivated the development of different types of partnerships with other regions (such as MENA and Eastern Europe) and powers like Brazil and India (Howorth 2016). This prompted the construction of a stronger EU–Brazil relationship in the years leading up to the 2007 Strategic Partnership 2007. Yet, the eurozone crisis, which began to unravel soon after as an economic, social and – crucially – political challenge to the EU, had a significant impact on the evolution of this relationship both on the level of action and of perceptions (Lazarou 2012).

Public perceptions and support for European integration within the EU itself were also profoundly affected. The institutional and credibility crisis of the EU provided fertile ground for the spread and strengthening of Eurosceptic parties and populist leaders. This phenomenon was particularly acute in the United Kingdom, which has historically had a tumultuous relationship with the EU (Taggart 2000). In that sense, the 2016 Brexit vote can be regarded as the result of a powerful narrative diffused by the media and by certain political leaders that framed the EU as a hindrance to Britain's outward-looking diplomacy. This perception, which was enhanced by rising inequality, degradation of public services (Becker, Fetzner and Novy 2017) and distrust of politicians, reinforced that idea that a referendum would reflect the "will of the people" in a better way than representative democracy.

The scepticism towards regional integration that is embodied by Brexit challenged the very concept of EU actorness that underpinned the Brazilian narrative for a partnership with the EU. At the same time, Brexit coincides with one of Brazil's most serious economic and social-institutional crises, which have prompted the election in 2018 of the first far-right populist president (Jair Bolsonaro) since the country's return to democracy. While Jair Bolsonaro's victory is by no means an isolated event, his views on climate change and minority rights may compromise the ratification of association agreements between Mercosur and the EU as well as bilateral relations between Brazil and EU member states.

Against this backdrop, this chapter aims to analyse the framing of Brexit by the Brazilian media and diplomatic elites, and to investigate its potential role in shaping perceptions about the EU. Specifically, we examine to what degree – and in which areas – perceptions of the EU as a legitimate actor and coherent partner have changed following the referendum, and how they may differ according to the types of Brexit (hard/soft/no deal). We assume that these perceptions may be affected by (1) endogenous (domestic) factors concerning Brazil's political and socioeconomic changes; (2) exogenous factors, directly related to messages conveyed by the EU; and (3) systemic factors related to “understandings of global trends, geopolitical contexts and economic interdependencies” (see the Introduction in this volume). The working hypothesis is that the uncertainty caused by Brexit does not significantly change the perception of the EU among Brazilian elites and media. Since the EU has established itself as a market power (Damro 2012), the expectation is that Brexit is seen from a predominantly economic angle.

## **Overview of EU–Brazil relations**

From inter-regional associates to strategic partners

The relationship between Brazil and the EU dates back to 1960, when diplomatic relations were formalized. For nearly three decades, the dialogue was not deeply explored as European integration – in particular the establishment of the Common Agriculture Policy – was perceived by Brazilian actors as a protectionist project (Lessa 2013). Furthermore, the central role of the US in Brazilian foreign policy, the military regime, extreme economic instability and limited EU supranational competences prevented the development of institutional relations to the detriment of bilateral initiatives originating from specific member states (Lessa 1998; Lohbauer 2000).

The entry into force of the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993 and the adoption of the single currency reinforced the image of the EU as successful regional project and a global soft normative power. During the early 2000s the EU successfully projected the image of an alternative foreign policy actor that could occupy the space left in the post-Cold War period in areas such as environmental protection and human rights (Vogler 1999; Delreux 2011; Balfour 2012; Smith 2015). Relations with Latin America were strengthened, following the renewed ambitions of the EU to become a more active international actor (Bretherton and Vogler 2005; Zielonka 2008). These ties were not exclusively forged with specific countries,

but privileged blocs such as the Common Market of the South (Mercosur), as an attempt to demonstrate the EU's support to regional integration (Saraiva 2004; Lenz 2012). In 1995 the EU and Mercosur signed an Interregional Framework Cooperation Agreement and defined priority areas for the forthcoming decades (Mattheis and Wunderlich 2017; Meissner 2018). Particular focus was given to the conclusion of an Association Agreement structured into three pillars: trade, cooperation and political dialogue. However, trade talks stagnated in 2004 due to the economic crises in Argentina and Brazil, and to protectionist attitudes from both sides. Negotiations resumed in 2010, but were again marked by difficulties posed by sensitive sections such as agriculture from the European side, and services and public procurement from Mercosur (European Commission 2018; Cámara Argentina de Comercio y Servicios 2018).

The paralysis of the EU–Mercosur negotiations coincided with an effort by Brussels to intensify individual relations with Brazil (Lazarou and Edler 2012). In 2007, under the Portuguese Presidency of the European Council, both actors signed a Strategic Partnership (SP) establishing regular high-level summits organized along four main axes: trade and investment, global economic governance, political and security affairs, and cooperation on development and governance issues, thus reflecting the multidimensionality of the initiative (Lazarou 2013b). The SP included 31 sectorial dialogues on a variety of topics including disarmament, investments, transports, human rights and climate change, and was followed by three action plans (European Commission 2007; Biato 2016). Academic, business and civil society meetings were held frequently. EU–Brazil inter-parliamentary relations were also intensified: the Brazilian National Congress set up an EU–Brazil Friendship Group and in 2015 the European Parliament (EP) created a delegation for relations with Brazil singling out this country from its Mercosur partners.

The domestic political and economic crisis leading up to and following the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the change of leadership in Brazil, which came after almost 14 years of PT governments, undermined the regular functioning of the sectorial dialogues (Blanco and Luciano 2018). At the same time, while the ascension of various types of populism across the EU (including the Brexit rhetoric) is perceived by Brazilian diplomats as a worrying sign regarding the EU's global actorness (Interview, Brazilian diplomats, May 2018), attitudes towards the EU remain overwhelmingly positive. A 2017 Eurobarometer survey noted that Brazilian respondents have a positive or very positive view of the EU (94

per cent, followed by 84 per cent in China and 83 per cent in India). In addition, Brazil is one of only three countries where the promotion of peace and democracy outside its borders is perceived as one of the EU's main assets (European Commission 2017).

### **The role of the UK within EU–Brazil relations**

The SP is one of the three main pillars of EU–Brazil relations, alongside EU–Mercosur inter-regionalism and bilateral partnerships with specific member states such as Portugal, Spain, France, Germany and the UK (Gratius 2018, 1). Great Britain was one of the first European powers to recognize Brazilian independence and a key mediator in the negotiations between Brazil and Portugal. Since then, diplomatic and commercial relations have thrived despite tensions concerning slave trade and the Brazilian dependency on British industrial products and financial investments during the 19th century (Cervo and Bueno 2002). Today, the Brazilian Foreign Ministry (Itamaraty) perceives the UK as a priority country given the volume of trade and investment. UK goods exports more than doubled between 2002 and 2012, and services exports were 59 per cent higher in 2014 than in 2009.<sup>1</sup> In 2013 the UK was the fourth largest investor in Brazil (UK Department for International Trade 2019). In 2016 Brazil accounted for “a significant share of UK total exports to Latin America and the UK represented 8.3% and 7.4% of Brazilian total exports to and imports from the EU, respectively” (UK–Brazil Joint Statement 2018). In 2012 the two countries formalized a Strategic Dialogue. Regular high-level meetings have been held since, covering topics such as climate change, education and cooperation on culture and sports. UK–Brazil cooperation has also been fruitful in the area of development and social challenges as well as in helping “shape the future development agenda in multilateral institutions such as the G20 and the United Nations” (DFID Brazil n.d.). Moreover, the UK has supported Brazil's candidacy for a permanent seat on a reformed UN Security Council (UNSC), a longstanding goal of Brazilian foreign policy.

The UK (alongside the Netherlands and Nordic countries) has been a key sponsor of the recently concluded “ambitious, balanced and comprehensive trade agreement” between the EU and Mercosur and has agreed to work closely with Brazil once Brexit is concluded (UK–Brazil Joint Statement 2018). As stated by Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Elizabeth Truss, during a recent visit to Brazil, “as we leave the European Union and establish an independent

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<sup>1</sup> Top UK exports to Brazil include machinery, vehicles, pharmaceuticals, electrical appliances and chemical products, mainly fungicides (UK Department for International Trade 2019).

trade policy we will be able to negotiate new trade agreements with major trading partners, like Brazil” (British Embassy in Brasilia 2018). Despite the positive tone of the British government, uncertainty around the new trade rules, tariff regimes and logistic procedures that may follow Brexit are a source of concern for the majority of 1,700 Brazilian firms that export to the UK. A recent survey organized by the Brazilian Embassy in the UK and the Brazilian Export and Investment Promotion Agency shows that 76% of Brazilian exporters believe that Brexit will affect their business. Out of those, 70% believe that the impact will be negative. In order to address these concerns, the Embassy has launched “Brazil Brexit Watch”, an online service to follow UK–EU negotiations and to provide information about the possible consequences stemming from different types of Brexit for Brazilian stakeholders (Embassy of Brasil in London 2019).

### **The study of Brazilian perceptions of the EU: review and methodology**

The study of perceptions of the EU in Brazilian academia has been sporadic, partially due to the limited research capacity in European studies in the country (Malamud and De Luca 2012). By contrast, Brazil has been part of several collaborative projects on the EU’s foreign relations (Gratius 2008; Grevi and de Vasconcelos 2008; Renard and Biscop 2012). Some studies have also investigated the perceptions of the EU among third-country elites and the general public, yet less so from the media perspective. Chaban and Elgström (2014) cover this gap to some extent, but their work is limited to Russia, China and India. Focusing on Brazil, Sandrin and Hoffmann argue that “the EU is mostly seen in a positive light, be it as a global security provider, as a trustworthy partner in trade or due to its welfare state, living standards, educational achievements and cultural richness” despite the association with colonial relations (Sandrin and Hoffmann 2016, 51). By analysing media and elites’ narratives, this chapter sheds light on the variety of implications for perceptions of the EU from the outside that possible types of Brexit may exert on Brazilian media, elites and other stakeholders. This chapter follows a mixed methods approach to investigate whether, and to what extent, the Brexit vote may have affected how Brazilian policy-makers and the media perceive the EU. The analysis is complemented by semi-structured interviews with three Brazilian senior diplomatic officials in London and Brussels responsible for following Brexit in order to identify how narratives about the EU are reinforced or deconstructed. A final element in the analysis consists of an overview of Brexit-related publications and events by major Brazilian think tanks.

In order to understand how Brazilian media perceive the EU and how Brexit was framed, we analysed the content of 22 newspapers and two main news agencies – France Presse in Portuguese/Brazil (AFP) and Agência Estado (AE) between January 2015 and July 2019.<sup>2</sup> Using the Nexis database we collected press articles (also called news stories) with more than 200 words containing the terms “EU” or “European Union” in the headline (N = 11263). Using a sample of ten articles for each month and following Iyengar (1991) and Feezell et al. (2019), we carried out a qualitative analysis to verify whether the press tended to simply “report the facts” (episodic framing), or if they discussed the causes and impact of economic and political phenomena (thematic framing). Furthermore, we identified the most visible topics and policy issues, and drew on Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) to identify the predominant frames (as defined by Entman 1993) used by the press and news agencies.

### **Challenge versus opportunity: perceptions of Brexit among Brazilian media and elites**

Our findings suggest that Brazil’s perceptions of Brexit have been marked by a mixed image of short-term challenges and economic instability and some long-term trade opportunities, especially for Brazilian key sectors such as agriculture. An additional narrative that emerges from the interviews is that a weaker EU would become a less constructive actor in the defence of international law, multilateralism, human rights and climate. Notwithstanding, the dominant perception is that the Brexit move means no major changes for Brazil’s bilateral relations with the EU.

### **Media coverage of Brexit in Brazil**

Brazilian media tend to see the EU as an economic bloc and trading power (Damro 2012) of predominantly intergovernmental character (Moravcsik 1993). Decisions that may affect Brazilian exports such as phytosanitary restrictions to agricultural products are covered regularly by specialized vehicles (AE 15/07/2015). Such news relies on statistics and declarations from producers’ associations, but the framing is predominantly episodic. The economic impact of EU decisions is frequently stressed and institutions such as the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the ECOFIN are also mentioned in various stories.

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<sup>2</sup> AE Agronegócios; AE Conjuntura e Finanças; Agence France Presse – Portuguese; Blogolandia Correio (Correio24horas.com.br); Diários Oficiais – Brazil; Economia; Finanças Notícias; Geral; O Globo; Globo Online; Interesse Nacional; Jornal Brasil em Folhas; Jornal Cana; Jornal da Tarde; Jornal do Commercio; Jornalistas & Cia; O Estado de S.Paulo; Política Tecnologia (informática); Turismo; Valor News; Variedades; WebNews – Brazil. Sports news were excluded from the search.



The international context also influences the coverage, as seen during the Russian-Ukrainian and Venezuelan crises. These events reinforce the perception of the EU as a normative power in the making (Wagnsson and Hellman 2018), whose credible global actorness (Jupille and Caporaso 1998) is constrained by member states' diverging foreign policy positions. The attempt to establish quotas to relocate refugees (usually referred to by the Brazilian media as "migrants") following the Syrian conflict is a clear example of this limitation. By contrast, decisions such as the large fine imposed on Google in 2019 and restrictions to the use of pesticides (*O Estado de S. Paulo* 2018) have reinforced the image of the EU as an international regulatory actor (White 2017).

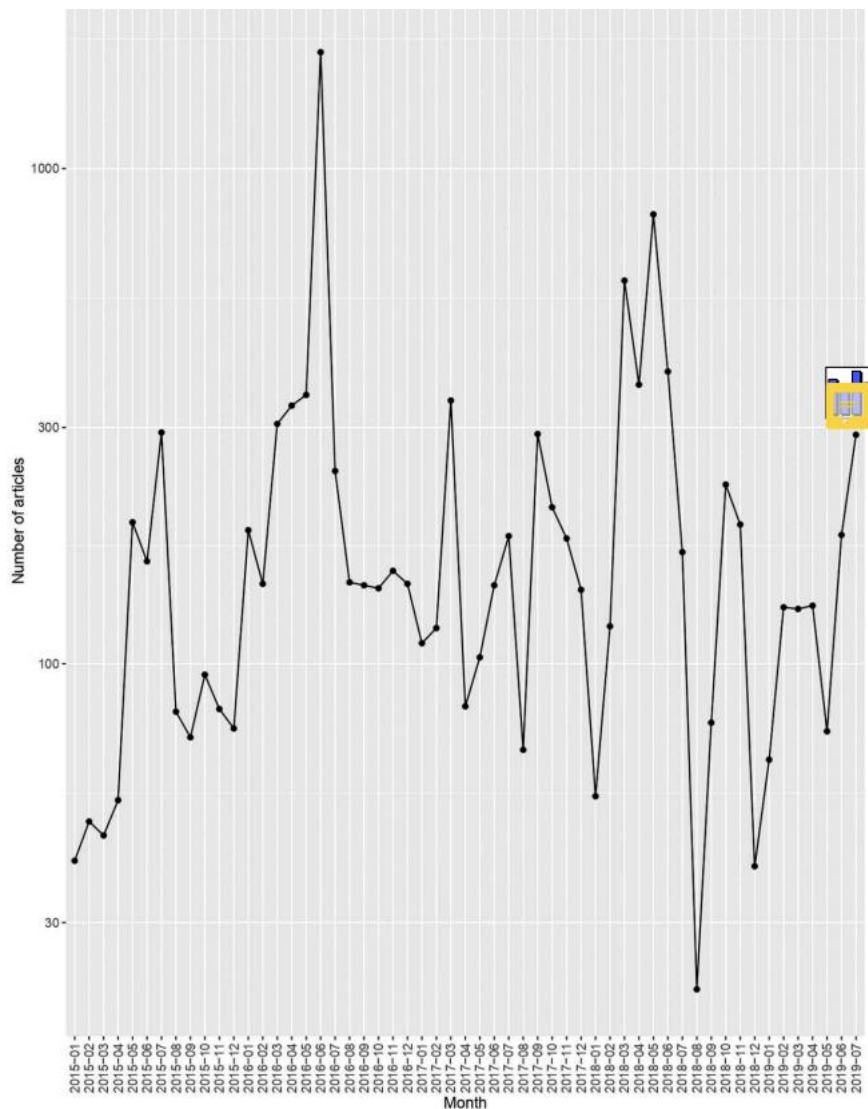
The term "Brexit" was first used by the Brazilian broadsheet *O Estado de S. Paulo* on 13 January 2013, in an article about the domestic factors that led David Cameron to call the referendum (*The Guardian* 2013): the historically tumultuous relationship between the UK and the EU (Taggart 1998), intra-party disputes, the long-lasting fear of excessive interference of Brussels on British politics and the perceived difficulty of the EU to react swiftly and effectively to the region's economic, social and identity challenges (*Gazeta do Povo* 2018; Taggart & Szczerbiak 2018). However, it was not before the 2015 UK general elections that "Brexit" became widespread and framed as a potential threat to the EU.

The analysis shows that the Brexit referendum has increased the EU's visibility in the media. While the average publication of EU-related stories during the period studied was of 206 articles/month, the number mounts up to 1,718 in June 2016 (15.25 per cent of the total observations).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The median and mean were, respectively, 144 and 176.76 articles/month (not considering June 2016) and 144 and 205.59 articles/month (considering June 2016).

Figure 9.1: Number of EU-related publications in Brazilian Newspapers between January 2015 and July 2019



Most articles are published by news agencies – namely by *Agence France Press* (AFP) Portuguese/Brazil – and are sometimes reproduced by mainstream media channels. Compared to other stories about the EU, a higher proportion of articles about Brexit has a thematic framing, which can be interpreted as an attempt to present a comprehensive picture – and to make sense – of the referendum to an audience that is not familiar with European politics. Brexit is usually reported as a somehow irrational result of internal disputes in the Conservative Party, lack of clear clues from the opposition leader and the rise of populism and xenophobia in Europe and elsewhere (*O Globo* 2016).

Unlike British coverage, there is a significantly stronger representation of pro-remain academics and stakeholders in the Brazilian media. Commentators tend to see EU as a much

stronger partner than Britain, which in turn would suffer harder economic consequences in the case of Brexit. The attempt of the UK to decouple the Union's four fundamental freedoms by trying to restrict migration is framed as responsible for pulling the negotiations "into a quagmire", as stated by European Commission trade representative Mattias Jorgensen in 2015 (AFP 2015). Straightforward language is used to describe the UK as an unprepared negotiator that accuses the EU of being a "punitive" actor (AFP 2017). The EU, on the other hand, tends to be depicted as a cohesive and coherent actor with a clear commander in chief (European negotiator Michel Barnier) and supported by the main member states' representatives as well as by the European Commission and the EU Council. The tone of the coverage is definitely positive across all sources and over time and despite sluggish economic recovery of the eurozone and the rise of nationalism, namely in AFP's articles.

Donald Tusk is frequently reported as a facilitator, a "good cop" in the negotiations, for his willingness to negotiate mutually beneficial solutions (the term "concession" is not used) and the intention of "keeping all options open" regarding Brexit (*The Guardian* 2019). Barnier, by contrast, is framed as a tough negotiator with a clear EU mandate to keep the EU in control of its frontiers and laws (*Correio Braziliense* 2018). His rhetoric is used to point out three critical consequences of Brexit: the hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (and the possible return of violent actions in the region), the economic impact on the British economy, and the rights of EU and British citizens (AE Conjuntura e Finanças 2018).

### **Brazilian elites' perceptions of Brexit (diplomats and think tanks)**

Brazilian diplomatic reactions regarding the Brexit process were expressed immediately following the results of the referendum. Itamaraty published a press release stating that the Brazilian government had respectfully received the results. The document reaffirmed the significance of the SP and expressed the belief that the decision would not stop the process of European integration and the spirit of openness characterizing both the EU and the UK (Brazilian Foreign Ministry 2016). The Brazilian Foreign Minister at the time, Jose Serra, published an opinion article in the prestigious newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* in which he reaffirmed that Brazil respects the result without celebrating it, highlighting that Brexit would undermine the pro-integration consensus, which has prevailed in Europe over the past decades, giving way to disintegration forces (Serra 2016). He added that Brexit would lead to uncertainties about economic growth in the UK and the EU, which would impact the rest of the world.

These initial responses point to some of the exogenous elements affecting Brazil's perception of the EU. A key concern reflected by Brazilian diplomats is the impact of Brexit on the EU's attitude towards trade. In this context, they view the UK as the EU's strongest and largest liberal voice in trade matters. Brexit is subsequently viewed as potentially having a negative impact on the block's attitude towards trade liberalization, with particular relevance for EU–Mercosur negotiations. In that context, one opinion is that, for Brazil, the worst scenario would be that of a “soft Brexit” with the UK in the single market as a rule taker. For Brazil, the UK within the EU matters as a rule-maker, as a moderate voice counterbalancing protectionist voices (interviews by the authors, Brussels and London, 2018).

On a different level, Brazilian diplomatic agents perceive Brexit as a signal of the crisis of the EU's model of regionalism. In that context, some of the diplomats interviewed also linked Brexit to other factors of instability within the EU that could affect the progress of integration such as the debate over the rule of law and the management of migration. One interviewee acknowledged that, while European regional integration differs substantially from regionalism in Latin America, it has always been a reference model (interviews by the authors, Brussels, 2018), suggesting that these crises may be diminishing the normative power of the EU as a model (Lazarou, 2013a).

Members of Itamaraty seem uncertain on whether Brexit will economically affect Brazil's relationship with the EU and the UK. In his article, Foreign Minister Serra (2016) expressed the belief that Brexit would not significantly alter trade and investment relations. However, in the opinion of the diplomats consulted, due to remaining uncertainties about the future relationship between the EU and the UK (soft or hard Brexit or no deal), there are also no evident opportunities for Brazil within the Brexit process. One overarching concern is access to UK markets, which also hinges on the final form of Brexit (interviews by the authors, London and Brussels, 2018). At the time of the research carried out for this chapter, diplomats also expressed concern that an EU–Mercosur trade agreement should be concluded before

Brexit, linked to the perception that the EU post-Brexit would likely turn into a more protectionist actor (interviews by the authors, London and Brussels, 2018)<sup>4</sup>.

A second set of perceptions expressed relate to the political effects of Brexit, namely the impact on the power and role of the EU in international affairs. Serra (2016) expressed the fear that with Brexit “nationalists and xenophobic forces would gain strength, leading to the closure of Europe to the rest of the world. It is not probable that it happens, but the world would lose if Europe bets on isolation rather than cooperation” (Serra 2016, authors’ own translation). Some of the diplomats consulted foresee negative impacts on EU–Brazil relations within the framework of bilateral dialogue in international forums, such as the WTO, UN Security Council and G20. This is especially the case on issues in which the UK has been a protagonist. In one view, the EU will lose significant political and diplomatic leverage without the added support of British credentials and international reputation (interviews by the authors, London and Brussels, 2018).

Diplomats foresee little change in terms of the ongoing EU–Brazil defence dialogue and welcome the scenario of an EU with a higher level of integration in defence post-Brexit with some enthusiasm as it offers potential opportunities for bilateral cooperation between the EU and the Brazilian defence industry, particularly in aerospace. An interesting observation emerges regarding security issues: while interviewees in both London and Brussels maintain that there will be little change as the main reference point in this area is NATO, rather than the EU, diplomats in Brussels appear to be more engaged in the ongoing efforts by the EU to enhance its capabilities as a security and defence actor through initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (interviews by the authors, London and Brussels, 2018).

Beyond these exogenous factors, emanating from the evolution of UK–EU relations, a shift in perceptions of the EU should also be associated with the substantial changes taking place in Brazil, with implications for Brazilian foreign policy: the endogenous factors. The inauguration of President Jair Bolsonaro on 1 January 2019 signalled several transformations in terms of the principles and partners prioritized in Brazilian foreign policy. While Brazil’s external action has remained relatively consistent under previous governments, Bolsonaro and his Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo have been advocating for a profound transformation prioritizing an

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<sup>4</sup> The EU–Mercosur trade agreement was concluded in June 2019, dispersing fears that it would not be concluded before Brexit.

alignment with the foreign policy of US President Donald Trump who has voiced scepticism towards global governance. The current administration has not expressed a formal EU strategy, yet it has been posited that if “the polarising discourse of Bolsonaro and its campaign team shapes Brazilian foreign and domestic policies over the next four years, the EU should expect a growing gap regarding interests and values between both regions” (Müller 2018). It is noteworthy that neither President Bolsonaro nor Foreign Minister Araújo have directly referred to the EU as a strategic or relevant partner for the country. Instead, prominence has been given to “like-minded” European governments such as those currently ruling Italy, Hungary and Poland (Passarinho 2019). Although Bolsonaro’s economic team is strongly defending trade liberalization, supporting the conclusion of the EU–Mercosur trade agreement (Dellan 2018), no intention to resume the political dialogue with the EU has been identified. In fact, statements made by the administration against the so-called ideology of “globalism” seem to go against the values and agenda defended by the EU at the international level (Lazarou 2019).

Brazil’s perceptions of the sustainability of the EU after Brexit have undoubtedly been influenced by global factors, namely by the rise of an anti-globalist tide across the world, and particularly by the growing weight of China. All interviewees maintained that Brexit cannot be entirely untied from the global scenario of nationalism, populism and the crisis of multilateralism. According to one diplomat a potential weakening of the EU would be less because of Brexit than because of internal EU weaknesses (e.g. rule of law issues in certain countries, migration crisis) and other external pressures, for example Chinese influence in the EU through investments, and Trump (interviews by the authors, Brussels, 2018).

The same views are largely shared by intellectual elites in Brazil, based on the study of key Brazilian think tanks. While domestic issues such as the economy and public security have been at the centre of think tank work during the years coinciding with the Brexit negotiations, online research has identified that four Brazilian think tanks have produced work on Brexit, namely the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV), the Institute of Applied Economic Research (Ipea), the Brazilian Center of International Relations (CEBRI), and the Igarapé Institute, through studies, events and media outreach. Overall, their assessments have focused on the negative economic and financial impacts of Brexit, highlighting the economic instability brought about by the referendum results on financial markets. Regarding EU–Brazil relations, Brazilian experts seem to share the aforementioned views on Brexit’s trade and political impacts. They, too, emphasize the likelihood of increased protectionism in a post-Brexit EU (Seixas Corrêa 2016). Moreover, experts agree that a weakening of the EU would be damaging for emerging countries such as Brazil (CEBRI 2017).

## Conclusions

This chapter has examined the dominant perceptions of Brexit and a post-Brexit EU within the narratives expressed by Brazilian diplomatic and intellectual elites and by the Brazilian media. The main questions examined have been to what degree perceptions of the EU have changed following the 2016 Brexit referendum compared to previously established understandings, and what factors – endogenous, exogenous and global – have been critical in forming these perceptions.

On a first level, our findings – both from the media analysis and the interviews carried out – suggest that Brexit has overall been an issue of low salience in Brazil. The low salience can be attributed to mostly endogenous factors, namely the predominance within the Brazilian public debate of critical domestic economic and socio-political issues. A second general observation is that the implications of Brexit for Brazil are mostly analysed from the perspective of trade. In this context, a post-Brexit EU is perceived as a more protectionist EU and indirectly a weaker EU in terms of global projection, since Brazilian perceptions of the EU's global actorness are predominantly framed in terms of “trade power Europe”. Yet, the message of increasing protectionism emanating from the EU appears to be the result of exogenous EU-related variables. Brexit, in conjunction with other phenomena perceived as aspects of both the “Leave” campaign and as crises in the EU's overall regional integration process (the rise of Euroscepticism, populist parties and xenophobia) seem to be sending the message – from Brussels to Brasilia – of a potentially less unified EU in terms of values and norms. At the same time, and in a somewhat contradictory manner, reporting on the actual Brexit negotiations transmits a sense of a cohesive and coherent EU with a clear rules base approach *vis-à-vis* the UK. Finally, it is possible to deduct from the research carried out, that the sense of a potentially weakened EU is linked to global factors, such as the rise of China and its influence in the EU.

In spite of these observations, the working hypothesis – that Brexit has not significantly changed the perception of the EU among Brazilian elites and media apart from the trade aspects – is by and large confirmed. However, given that the time frame applied (2016–present) is limited to the pre-Brexit, but post-referendum period, further research will be needed in the future to confirm the validity and durability of these findings. The same temporal limitation applies to the evaluation of the prospects for EU–Brazil relations under President Bolsonaro. At the time of writing, the new leadership has only been in power for six months, during which – apart from the conclusion of the EU–Mercosur agreement – there has not been a solid and concrete approach to Brussels from Brasilia.

It is possible to speculate that trade will continue to feature high on the agenda, while other issues such as the environment and human rights will become points of controversy. There are also indications that EU member states may be preferred to the Brussels-level by this government – due to its scepticism towards multilateralism. However, as it is still too early to assert such conclusions

with certainty, the analysis of EU–Brazil relations and perceptions under Bolsonaro should be a research agenda to be pursued in the coming months and years.

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