

Article

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: European Disintegration, Brexit, and Gibraltar

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the contours of Gibraltar, a uniquely situated region in Europe and a non-self-governing British overseas territory. It explores the basis for Gibraltar’s continued and maintained presence within the EU after Brexit. Gibraltar’s full accession into the Schengen area, which was expected to be implemented by the end of 2022, is a significant departure from the disintegration that was observable elsewhere in Brexit negotiations but also does not align with the United Kingdom’s staunch resistance to Schengen more generally. This move will potentially result in Gibraltar having more features in common with what the EU refers to as outermost regions, which are remote areas within the EU where special provisions exist. To that end, this variation in approach by the United Kingdom has placed Gibraltar in an altogether different category of its own and invites new questions about the region’s specificity and status, as well as about the process of disintegration more generally. We argue that Gibraltar’s desire to join the Schengen area has presented challenges to the ongoing predicament of Brexit and has exacerbated its outlier position within the EU. This has given rise to specific questions that this article aims to address: What is the current situation of Gibraltar regarding the United Kingdom and the EU? And, what can the case of Gibraltar teach us in terms of disintegration? This article also examines, from a political science perspective, how reclassifying territories can be employed as a vector to facilitate the United Kingdom’s efforts to disintegrate from the EU, but underscores the ongoing issues surrounding the reclassification of Gibraltar and its people, with every effort to do so proving challenging.

Keywords

Brexit; disintegration; EU; European integration; Gibraltar; outermost regions; overseas territories; United Kingdom

Issue

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1. Introduction

In recent years, significant policy and scholarly attention have been devoted to the study of European (dis)integration (Markakis, 2020; Vollaard, 2018; Webber, 2018). After years of continuous expansion and deeper integration, the potential for EU disintegration has slowly started to receive more attention in tandem with examinations of (ultra)nationalist support and Eurosceptics, particularly regarding the broader academic concern with the rise of populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mueller, 2016). In particular, the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the EU (via the Brexit referendum) has pro-

vided further impetus to this emerging field of inquiry (Shore, 2021; Wilson, 2020). This effort has resulted in a wide variety of analyses that have studied the nature of the implications involved when a member state decides to leave the EU, and what impact that has on both the governance of its related territories and throughout the EU more generally. For our purposes, we advance the notion that examining smaller and less commonly considered political actors can generate significant insight into the process of disintegration.

Research studying the causes and modes of disintegration has mostly focused on specific industries, such as fisheries (Phillipson & Symes, 2018), the financial sector

(Van Kerckhoven, 2021), as well as policy fields, including global cooperation (Wouters & Van Kerckhoven, 2019) and issues surrounding last-minute efforts to acquire different kinds of citizenship to retain access to the single market and the benefits that integration bestows (O'Dubhghaill, 2019). In most of these analyses, the United Kingdom is approached as a unitary actor, a single landmass that is responding to the difficulties of managing a democratically given mandate and the intricacies involved therein. This has had the effect of overlooking the specificity of the wide variety of effects and the experiences of other regions and overseas territories to which the United Kingdom has historically laid claim.

As such, this article approaches disintegration from the perspective of Brexit, but its conclusions and arguments inform the broader discussions concerning disintegration. As a framework of analysis, this study observes the perspective of an actor that seeks secession as an independent variable. The outcome, the disintegration as such, is defined by a pathway that includes the geographical location of the parts that make up the seceding entity.

In this case, the actor seeking disintegration is the United Kingdom, which left the EU through Brexit. However, the United Kingdom has several territories that, due to their geographical location, have been subject to different levels of disintegration. Our particular focus is on Gibraltar, a non-self-governing enclave, which is only one of the many United Kingdom parts that did not share the preference for leaving the EU. We review the different outcomes and support for Brexit hereunder, drawing parallels to the case of Gibraltar.

Gibraltar is unique in the context of Europe's outermost regions (ORs)—i.e., regions typified by their comparative remoteness from the capital city of the country to which they belong and historically occupied core-periphery style relationships with this "home" countries with which they are associated.

Before providing an analysis of the specific modes and causes of disintegration, it is necessary to examine Brexit and the history of the United Kingdom's relationship with Gibraltar more closely. The article then discusses the position of Gibraltar pre and post-Brexit, before turning to overseas departments and ORs. We end with a short conclusion.

2. Brexit and Its Impact on the Different Parts of the United Kingdom

Scotland, which voted to remain within the EU (62% against 38%), has, in the aftermath of Brexit, repositioned itself in a manner more in line with the EU's view on issues concerning immigration, a common leit-motif in the run-up to the Brexit referendum (Thiec, 2021). This discrepancy between the United Kingdom's and Scottish governments has also been leveraged by the Scottish Nationalist Party to argue for a second referendum on the topic of Scotland's independence (colloqui-

ally referred to as "Indyref2"), an increasingly pressing concern after Brexit. Moreover, the features and composition of Scotland's system of governance diverge from the United Kingdom's in many other respects as it has a system of proportional representation, its own parliament, and a broadly pro-EU disposition (Hughes, 2020). The parallel with Gibraltar here can be observed in the necessity of smaller entities to reposition themselves regarding the EU in the aftermath of Brexit. In precisely this vein, Thiec (2021, p. 122) claims that:

By arguing that membership of the EU, far from representing a threat to sovereignty, is a way—especially for small member states—of amplifying their national sovereignty by embracing their interdependence with other nations, the First Minister of Scotland has clearly underlined the European dimension of her party's narrative of independence and dissociated her government's position on Europe from that of the United Kingdom government.

Wales voted to leave the EU by a narrow margin of 52.5% to 47.5%. The commonly cited reason for this result is attributed to wealthy retirees from the United Kingdom, whereby it was even claimed that "Wales was made to look like a Brexit-supporting nation by its English settlers" (Perraudin, 2019).

Similar to Wales, Gibraltar also permits residents of the United Kingdom to retire there (currently, there are 1,741 pension recipients from the United Kingdom doing so). However, no similar effect can be observed in comparison to Gibraltar's overwhelmingly unambiguous decision to remain in the EU as it only counted a total of 823 votes to leave, out of about 20,000 total votes (The Electoral Commission, 2017).

One of the primary ramifications of Brexit for Wales was the replacement of the European Regional Development and European Social Funds (ESF) with the United Kingdom's Shared Prosperity Funds, despite promises that there would be no concomitant loss of provisions for Wales after the Brexit referendum (Jones, 2017). The Welsh Government (*Llywodraeth Cymru*) has recently estimated that the difference between the EU's provisions and the United Kingdom's post-Brexit provisions results in a shortfall of approximately £772 million (Evans, 2022). Disintegration has proven a particularly costly endeavour for Wales, in ways very similar to Gibraltar.

Finally, Northern Ireland shares with Gibraltar the necessity to put specific provisions in place concerning the necessity to have a border with an EU member state (with The Republic of Ireland and Spain, respectively) in the aftermath of Brexit (Birrell & Gray, 2017). The difficulties involved in this case are outlined in what follows, but here we highlight that the parallels between Northern Ireland and Gibraltar include a relatively porous border that is traversed by significant swathes of the population daily. In Northern Ireland such crossings are estimated

to be roughly 30,000 and in Gibraltar it is estimated to be roughly 16,000 (de Mars et al., 2018). The management of the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland has proven a particularly difficult sticking point in Brexit negotiations (Murphy & Evershed, 2022) and Gibraltar's interest in joining the Schengen area is an altogether different approach to managing the disruption brought about by Brexit.

The common denominator shared by all of these different regions, within and beyond the mainland United Kingdom, is that they were all affected by Brexit and have had to reorient their approach regarding the EU. However, we argue that Brexit's impact on these different entities cannot be viewed as being fundamentally similar. Each area has its own historical relationship to the United Kingdom (and its monarchy) and has different levels of autonomy through which to express its respective political will. The necessity to disintegrate the United Kingdom's position from that of the EU has been coupled with, either coincidentally or not, moves made within further flung regions to alter and/or disintegrate their own relationship with the United Kingdom.

This is an opportune time for scholars to pay closer attention to what it is that these peripheral entities can tell us about the story of Brexit, the nature of disintegration from within and without, and the unique predicament that the United Kingdom finds itself in. We will focus on Gibraltar as one of these interesting areas due to its unique location on the Iberian peninsula.

While Gibraltar's desire to join the Schengen area does represent a departure from the programme followed by the United Kingdom, it is a significantly less radical programme of action than that undertaken by other formerly non-self-governing British overseas territories. In April 2022, six countries (Jamaica, Belize, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bahamas, and Grenada) sought to terminate the position of England's monarchy as their head of state (Yang, 2022). As Wood (2011) contends, the relationship between Britain's overseas territories and its own mode of governance is often thrown into sharp relief when these territories are examined: "The law of the overseas territories often sheds light on the British constitution itself. Perhaps surprisingly for a country without a written constitution, Britain has contributed handsomely to the writing of constitutions for others, starting with its overseas territories" (Wood, 2011, p. 827).

Brexit has provided a broader context based on which smaller countries can express their desire to disintegrate from the United Kingdom in a similar way to how the United Kingdom expressed its desire to no longer be a part of the EU.

This article specifically looks into the case of Gibraltar, a small landmass at the southern tip of the EU, and tries to extrapolate based on this microcosm into an examination of some causes and modes of disintegration that have conventionally received less academic scrutiny. Gibraltar's uniqueness notwithstanding has yet

to receive sustained and substantial attention within academic circles, except some recent outstanding anthropological accounts (Haller, 2021; Irvine, 2022) and some legal analyses (Hendry & Dickson, 2018; Waibel, 2009). Gibraltar has so far failed to attract substantial attention from observers and academics working on the topic of Brexit in comparison with the depth of analysis related to other issues. However, we argue that the case of Gibraltar, with respect to Brexit, clearly displays less commonly considered modes and methods that are equally indicative of disintegration more generally. In doing so, the article contributes to the political science debate on this topic but also builds on a variety of other disciplines in the broad field of social sciences.

3. Gibraltar and the United Kingdom

As suggested previously, Brexit has created some specific situations for specific areas within and beyond the United Kingdom, not just because the last is not contained to a single landmass, but also has a presence on landmasses in which it is joined to another EU member state (such as in Northern Ireland and Gibraltar). The limited view of the United Kingdom as being contained within one landmass seems to have given rise to a great deal of seemingly insoluble problems with the actual implementation of Brexit. One telling example of this can be observed in Northern Ireland in terms of issues concerning the "backstop," and the intractable problem of managing a border that is shared with an EU member state. However, another instance in which the United Kingdom, as a third country, shares a land border with the EU is Gibraltar. Gibraltar has been a British overseas territory since 1713 and has proven to be an important strategic point for the United Kingdom, in particular regarding military matters (Archer, 2005; Constantine, 2006).

British Gibraltar was established after the Spanish Succession Wars when an Anglo-Dutch army seized the fortified town of Gibraltar. It was then assigned to the British after the Treaty of Utrecht (1713, article 10), which stated that it would be "held and enjoyed absolutely with all manner of right forever" by Britain while adding that if Britain decided to part with it the Crown of Spain would be the preferred successor (for more see Hills, 1974). However, there was no reference to the isthmus that joins the "rock" of Gibraltar to the peninsula, to which Spain has claimed sovereignty (Gold, 2010). Initially mainly used as a military stronghold, Gibraltar slowly transitioned into a civil British haven, although it represented a key military stronghold in the Second World War (Hills, 1974). The experience of Gibraltar is similar, in some respects, to another of the United Kingdom's strategically valuable overseas territories, namely Malta, which experienced a barrage of attacks between June 1940 and December 1942. The efforts of the Maltese people were recognised by King George VI and Malta was awarded the George Cross,

an honorific so significant that it was incorporated into Malta's flag in 1943. While Malta struggled with issues of self-governance and only received political independence from the United Kingdom in 1964, Gibraltar had self-government in 1950, with the coming into effect of the Gibraltar Constitution Order and Gibraltar Election Rules. That understood Gibraltar opted to remain a British overseas territory, whereas Malta became fully independent and later a fully-fledged member state of the EU. For context, it might be necessary to examine this issue in terms of broader discourses about decolonization from around the same time, a topic to which the following paragraph is dedicated.

In 1963, as part of the decolonization process, Spain requested that the UN Decolonization Committee looked into the enclave of Gibraltar, leading to a referendum on whether Gibraltarians wanted to join the United Kingdom or Spain that resulted in a strong demonstration of support for a continuous affiliation with the United Kingdom. The 1969 Constitution stated that Gibraltar would remain part of "Her Majesty's Dominions" unless and until an Act of Parliament provided otherwise, but more significantly it also included the commitment from the British Government that it will "never enter into arrangements under which the people of Gibraltar would pass under the sovereignty of another state against their freely and democratically expressed wishes." This resulted in a Spanish blockade that lasted 16 years (Gold, 2005). Relations remained tense, with Spain and Britain holding yearly talks about the sharing of sovereignty. Gibraltarians disapproved of such a sharing agreement as shown in a referendum organized by Gibraltar in 2002. Gibraltar never sought independence from the United Kingdom but received a high degree of economic independence as its economy grew due to favourable taxation over the years.

4. Gibraltar Within the EU Pre-Brexit

Gibraltar joined the European Community (the predecessor to the EU) as a dependent territory of the United Kingdom via the 1972 European Communities Act. Gibraltar has been denoted as a "special territory" of the United Kingdom and the EU until Brexit. Gibraltar oscillated in terms of its political identification with the European project for some time and neither participated in the 1975 United Kingdom's European Communities membership referendum nor did it participate in the European Parliament elections between 1979 and 1999. However, a case was brought before the European Commission on Human Rights regarding the inability of a British citizen in Gibraltar to participate in the 1994 European Parliament elections (*Denise Matthews v. The United Kingdom*; see Rudolf, 1999). Gibraltar was allowed to take part in the 2004 European Parliament elections as part of the South-West England constituency (as well as those elections that followed), after a 2002 British Parliament Agreement.

Within the United Kingdom, Gibraltar is a British overseas territory. These entities are (normally) internally self-governing in most matters, but the United Kingdom retains responsibility for defence and foreign relations. There are 14 United Kingdom overseas territories, and nine of these entities are associated with the EU via the Overseas Association Decision, which was a decision reached by the EU in 2013. Gibraltar was the only United Kingdom overseas territory included as part of the EU under article 355(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The other overseas territories are much further removed from the United Kingdom and the EU and as such were not included in this provision.

Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) are not directly part of the EU and, thus, are not directly subject to EU law; however, these entities possess associate status. Part IV of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union discusses the member states' broad agreement to associate certain non-European countries and territories, which have special relations with, for example, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, with the EU to maintain and promote economic and social development, the establishment of harmonised or otherwise close economic cooperation, the necessity to mitigate the effect of discrimination in economic matters (something that OCTs are particularly at risk of due to their remoteness and parenthetically their dependence), and the workers within OCTs' right to free movement (Clegg, 2016; Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2012, articles 198 to 203). Annex II then lists these countries, including United Kingdom's overseas territories, excluding Gibraltar.

As such, Gibraltar had a closer relationship with the EU than the United Kingdom's other overseas territories, given that it was a component of the United Kingdom's accession in 1973. Under this specific status, Gibraltar has applied most EU laws, except regarding the Common Agricultural Policy on issues related to VAT, the EU's Common Commercial Policy, and the EU's Common Customs Territory. A more thorough overview of these derogations can be examined in articles 28 and 29 of the 1972 United Kingdom's Act of Accession.

The citizens of Gibraltar were much more supportive, and enthusiastic, about the EU than those on the British mainland. Anecdotal evidence, by Garcia (2016), describes that Gibraltarians paid to be able to change their license plates to the EU common format numbers. They also enjoy EU identity cards and health cards, the former is a valid travel document in the EU that does not exist in the United Kingdom, and the latter provides them with access to medical care throughout the EU.

5. Gibraltar and Brexit

Gibraltar was the only British overseas territory that previously participated in EU elections. It was also the only territory that allowed for Brexit to be voted on. This was due to its special relationship with the EU, given

that it is bordered by Spain. Gibraltarians voted with an overwhelming majority to stay in the EU. Out of 20,172 votes (on a total of 24,119 registered voters), 19,322 (95.91%) voted in favour of remaining in the EU (The Electoral Commission, 2017). However, since the United Kingdom's voters voted in favour of Brexit with a 51.9% majority, the United Kingdom and Gibraltar had to get set to leave the EU (The Electoral Commission, 2017). Compared to the other United Kingdom overseas territories, the impact of the decision to leave was much more direct and apparent in Gibraltar.

Continuous access to the EU's single market was extremely important for Gibraltar. Its shipping, trade, and gambling industries grew strongly due to this access and became an important part of its economy, as well as its investment, insurance, and banking services which benefited strongly from passporting rights, not unlike other United Kingdom-based financial institutions (Van Kerckhoven & Odermatt, 2021). Gibraltar can also offer tariff-free access to investors under the free movement of capital rules. Additionally, Gibraltar received significant EU funding, mainly under the ESF and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Funding from the ERDF has been historically important to Gibraltar—like how it had been to Wales, as mentioned previously. Gibraltar also received funds from the Growth and Jobs Goal Programme, 2014–2020 (Clegg, 2016). Approximately €5.5 million was allocated to aiding sustainable economic growth, competitiveness, additional apprenticeships, assistance to people under 25 and long-term unemployed people, fostering an entrepreneurial climate, and harmonising education with the demands of the labor market. This programme was supplemented by resources from the ESF, with initiatives fostering sustainable and quality employment, labor mobility, and education and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning (European Social Fund, 2015). A range of businesses has been strengthened as a consequence of EU funding, including those involved in freight forwarding, light industrial activity, eco-tourism, broadband services, and medical and health services.

Gibraltar's government claims that EU-funded projects have directly contributed to the retention and continued safeguarding of 3,615 jobs. These programmes have also resulted in the matriculation of 5,000 qualified students. One of the 2014–2020 programme's aims was to "assist in sustainable growth in a low-carbon economy" (European Social Fund, 2015). Much like elsewhere in Europe, there was a focus on fostering and facilitating the expedient production of renewable energies. Funding has been offered for a micro-renewable energy project.

EU funds have also been given for a range of other projects, such as partial funding (£4.3 million came from the public purse while £1.5 million came from the EU, with the remainder being donated by civil society actors) to build the Commonwealth Park, Gibraltar's first "green zone." The continued existence of all of these initiatives is potentially jeopardised by Brexit.

Additionally, Gibraltarians see the EU in general, and EU law in particular, as a safety measure against Spain, which at certain points has proven to be willing to demonstrate an interest in shared sovereignty, or has even displayed hostility towards Gibraltar (Garcia, 2016). Following the referendum, Gibraltar's chief minister argued that "a hard Brexit would be really an existential threat to [our] economic model" (McSmith, 2016). After the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU, Spain's acting Foreign Minister Manuel Garcia-Margallo stated, on 23 June 2016, that Spain wanted to jointly govern Gibraltar with the United Kingdom. However, Gibraltar's Chief Minister Fabian Picardo immediately responded that there would be no such talks, as Gibraltarians rejected co-sovereignty with Spain with a staggering 99% of votes in 2002. Garcia-Margallo then stated that Spain would push to keep Gibraltar out of any general Brexit negotiations and will aim for bilateral talks with the United Kingdom to seek co-sovereignty of the peninsula (Nazca, 2016). The EU (Council of the European Union, 2017) stated the following in its guidelines on negotiations for withdrawal: "After the United Kingdom leaves the Union, no agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom may apply to the territory of Gibraltar without the agreement between the Kingdom of Spain and the United Kingdom." This clearly hints at veto power for both Spain and the United Kingdom and diminished the prospect for Gibraltarians to be involved in the discussions.

Tensions rose and waned in the years that followed, ultimately resulting in a deal in October 2018, the specific details of which have not been made available to the public, although it was stated that Gibraltar was not going to pose an issue in the Brexit negotiations. Such a bilateral deal was also in line with the 2017 guidelines from the Council of the EU. Gibraltar was not included in the scope of the 2020 EU–United Kingdom Trade and Cooperation Agreement as was already decided at the European Council meeting of 25 November 2018 that:

After the United Kingdom leaves the Union, Gibraltar will not be included in the territorial scope of the agreements to be concluded between the Union and the United Kingdom. However, this does not preclude the possibility to have separate agreements between the Union and the United Kingdom in respect of Gibraltar. Without prejudice to the competences of the Union and in full respect of the territorial integrity of its member states as guaranteed by article 4(2) of the 1992 Treaty on EU, those separate agreements will require a prior agreement of the Kingdom of Spain. (Tusk & Juncker, 2018)

Gibraltar was, therefore, not included in the preparations for the withdrawal agreement. The important veto right given to Spain should also be borne in mind here. It was only on the very last day of the transition period that an agreement was reached so that Gibraltar could

in principle join the Schengen area, but a treaty on the matter has yet to be negotiated.

This last-minute decision was immediately followed by a request by the United Kingdom and Spanish Governments to the President of the European Commission asking to mandate them with the powers to create such a Treaty, eventually leading to the creation of a special committee in charge of handling EU–Gibraltar matters, which contained representatives of both Spain and the United Kingdom. On 20 July 2021, the EU Commission adopted a Recommendation for a Council Decision authorizing the opening of negotiations for an EU–United Kingdom Agreement on Gibraltar (European Commission, 2021), which was approved by the European Council in October 2021 (Council of the European Union, 2021). A formal agreement and negotiations are yet to be concluded, failing to adhere to the deadlines, which required the continuation as well as the introduction of temporary bridging measures.

While Gibraltar might occasionally be either viewed or framed as just a smaller part of a bigger system of (dis)integration, there are also instances in which the mischaracterisation of Gibraltar incurred significant delays in the ratification of extremely time-sensitive legislation in anticipation of May 2019. The reason revolves around Spain's perception of Gibraltar as a sort of satellite of the United Kingdom in terms of affiliation. Gibraltar's legal status, it seems, has changed little since 1964 when representatives of the Spanish Government:

Further insisted that the present population of Gibraltar was “prefabricated” by the British to facilitate British rule. These representatives reiterated the argument that Gibraltar and Spain are inextricably linked, claiming that Gibraltar would suffer severe economic consequences should Spain close the border. When the United Nations passed Resolutions 2070 and 2231, Spain supported both measures, satisfied that neither resolution recognized Gibraltar's right to self-determination. (Lincoln, 1994, pp. 310–311)

Nearly identical tensions flared up in March 2019 in response to a draft law by the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs that outlined the protocol to be adopted concerning visa-free travel by United Kingdom nationals to member states, provided that a similar arrangement was welcomed by the United Kingdom's House of Commons for the inverse to take place (Regulation [EU] 2018/1806 of 14 November 2018, 2018). Negotiations were stalled and the original rapporteur was replaced after the discovery of a reference to Gibraltar as a “crown colony,” a term employed before 1981 when it was changed to “dependent territory” and then to “British overseas territory.” In the original rapporteur, the United Kingdom's MEP Claude Moraes was removed and replaced by MEP Sergei Stanishev, a move that Gibraltar's government

argued was a political gesture that was undertaken to remove the previous rapporteur because they were from the United Kingdom. Gibraltar's government condemned the anachronistic characterisation, calling it “disgraceful,” alleging that the move was part of an effort to single out Gibraltar for mistreatment by Spanish MEPs based on nationalist zeal (HM Government of Gibraltar, 2019). To show the stakes of mischaracterising Gibraltar, we can look at the second rapporteur's assessment of the draft law's importance for the citizens of both European citizens and the United Kingdom:

Today's vote is an important step for guaranteeing the right to visa-free travel for European and British citizens after Brexit, especially in the case of no deal. It is no secret that the negotiations were blocked over the Gibraltar footnote, but in the end, it was the Parliament who demonstrated responsibility and put citizens' interests first. The Council's irresponsible approach seriously undermines the spirit of sincere cooperation between the EU institutions and I hope it will not be repeated in the future. (European Parliament, 2019)

As such, the current situation for Gibraltar remains unclear about its future direction with the EU. Clearly, Gibraltar would benefit enormously from a situation whereby it can open its borders to the EU, but that would reverse what Brexit was meant to achieve. At present, discontinued funding, questions of self-determination, and exactly how Gibraltar and its people should best be understood are exacerbating older tensions as a result of the necessity to disintegrate from the EU.

6. Conclusions

It is clear that the interests of the United Kingdom and Gibraltar were not aligned and that a referendum held by Gibraltarians in 2002 is still casting a long shadow regarding power-sharing initiatives. Gibraltar's complicated history, coupled with its unique geographical setting, have allowed for broader considerations to be brought to the fore concerning both the United Kingdom's singular “islandness” and its contentious and longstanding connection to territories overseas and the extent to which they are permitted to disintegrate from the United Kingdom (by referendum or otherwise). What this has meant is that Brexit is not a phenomenon with a restricted effect on one entity alone, but has instead spread to many other areas, giving rise to questions about what kinds of entities can suspend rules during transitory phases (and what kinds of pressures would permit that) as well as what the outcome of such processes would mean in terms of (further) disintegration elsewhere.

The causes and modes of disintegration are not clear-cut because the United Kingdom is not a discrete entity. Instead, it possesses connections and agreements spanning centuries. However, it seems that the provisions put

in place to stem the tide of the negative effects of Brexit by the EU far outweigh the volume of similar provisions made in anticipation of Brexit by the United Kingdom. What this means is that Gibraltar, and seemingly marginal entities like it, will remain a fascinating object of critical scrutiny now and in the future in terms of continued efforts in the domain of disintegration. Thus, it could be argued that, by taking back control, the United Kingdom has led to a bottom-up push in some of its overseas territories to wrest control from it through disintegration. Gibraltar can be seen as a special case in European integration and disintegration following Brexit. While the specificities of how Gibraltar will manage Schengen membership or whether Gibraltar will see itself embroiled in additional efforts to classify and reclassify the landmass are vague, one thing is certain: Gibraltar is stuck between a rock and a hard place because it embraces the status quo, except where it does not.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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