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# The Pivotal Role of EU Research Diasporas in EU-UK Scientific and Diplomatic Relations

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SCIENCE DIPLOMACY - 15 YEARS ON

UNITED KINGDOM

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The implementation of Brexit in 2020 upended EU-UK foreign relations. Among the many policy areas that were critically disrupted, research and science faced substantial changes, posing challenges for scientists, institutions of higher education, and research organizations, as well as the UK government, European governments, and the EU overall. Researchers based in the UK experienced this disruption through changes in funding, access to resources, international collaborations, and mobility. The UK's departure from the EU funding program Horizon Europe, whose predecessor Horizon 2020 had awarded around €7 billion in research grants to the UK,<sup>1</sup> meant that multiple research opportunities were stripped away from UK-based researchers. Among them, EU researchers based in the UK have particularly struggled with these circumstances. The EU scientific diaspora has had a unique experience dealing with the transformations precipitated by the no-deal Brexit,<sup>2</sup> which confers this group a pivotal position in the reconstruction of the scientific and diplomatic relations between the EU and the UK.

In some cases, the uncertainty and loss of opportunities have triggered the return of EU researchers to their home countries in the interest of their research and quality of life.<sup>3</sup> These conditions are coupled with a 53% drop in new enrollments of EU students in UK universities since Brexit.<sup>4</sup> The relative weight of academics from the EU in the UK has not changed substantially since 2014—approximately 16% of the UK academic workforce<sup>5,6</sup>— but the 70% decrease in net migration from the EU relative to its 2016 peak<sup>7</sup> implies that EU researchers in the UK are still confronting the consequences of Brexit. If these declining trends persist and the employment of these researchers remains on uneven grounds,<sup>8</sup> the position that the EU diaspora holds within the UK research ecosystem will continue to weaken.

More than four years after the official withdrawal of the UK, efforts to rebuild EU-UK foreign policy agreements are still ongoing. While the UK rejoining Horizon Europe has been a positive step towards this reconstruction for science policy, restoring confidence across UK and EU actors, the long-term effects of the interruption in access to funding and international collaborations, and the radical transformations in mobility,<sup>9</sup> are yet to be determined. As both the EU and the UK have historically been scientific powerhouses, Brexit and its effects pose a unique set of considerations for science diplomacy. Continuous collaboration between scientists, researchers, policymakers, and diplomats is crucial for the future of EU-UK relations.

Scientific and research diasporas have a bridging role in promoting effective dialogue between governments, research institutions, and civil society. In the UK, research diasporas from various EU countries have organized into politically independent associations with the goal of promoting peer support and offering expert advice to decision-makers in science and research policy. They aim to raise awareness of the key role of EU scientists in the UK by bringing closer their contributions to local communities, and they strive to enhance scientific relations between the UK and their home countries by catalyzing connections between British and European institutions.<sup>10</sup> However, the full scope of these networks remains unseen, and their potential is often underestimated. Despite their long-standing work, these EU diasporas are rarely considered key actors in science diplomacy.

Firstly, these organizations have stepped up to support researchers where institutions were and are falling short, providing advice on the changes to the UK immigration system<sup>11</sup> and organizing webinars on the impact of Brexit in their daily lives and on cross-cultural differences relevant to migrants in a post-Brexit era.<sup>12</sup> Some have also monitored the effects of Brexit within their communities by conducting periodic surveys.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, scientific diaspora associations have generated<sup>14</sup> or been involved in<sup>15</sup> comprehensive policy reports illustrating research collaborations and mobility in the bilateral context of the UK

and their home country. Lastly, such organizations continuously advocate for the large numbers of EU researchers in the UK and expand their networks. Through collaborations with their corresponding embassies, events have been organized to reflect on the role of researchers in EU-UK society;<sup>16</sup> highlight the relevance of diversity, equity, and inclusion within research;<sup>17</sup> and reinforce the visibility of these diasporas to the public.

These examples demonstrate that EU research diasporas can play a pivotal role in EU-UK scientific and diplomatic relations. Growing organically throughout the years and having created meaningful connections with research institutions and governments both in the UK and their home countries, these associations have developed a unique and valuable network of contacts. They embody a volunteer-based and grassroots approach, empowering researchers to leverage their position as stakeholders in the development of science policy by initiating conversations with decision-makers. Furthermore, the diversity and interdisciplinarity that characterizes these professional organizations amplifies their reach and advocacy, widening participation and collaborations.

Recently, with the goal of improving their standing to boost their influence, these networks have come together in an overarching community of EU researchers in the UK under the EU co-funded project CONNECTS-UK.<sup>18</sup> This project aims to join the efforts of these diaspora associations to influence EU-UK relations, and with the addition of Native Scientists,<sup>19</sup> also create meaningful connections between scientists and children, focusing on underserved local communities to inspire, educate, and empower the next generation. CONNECTS-UK holds the promise for a new era of science diplomacy in which scientific and research diasporas are finally regarded as key players in shaping foreign and science policy, and therefore situated at the forefront of impactful science diplomacy.

The EU scientific diaspora in the UK enriches both EU and UK research ecosystems, highlighting the importance of networking and community building within civil society. It is crucial that the rebuilding of EU-UK foreign and scientific

relations engages politically independent grassroots organizations advancing international research, technology, and innovation clear of barriers. By including these EU diaspora communities in policy making in the post-Brexit era, the future of EU-UK relations will remain deeply connected to civil society.

At the macro-level, ministries focused on science and education around the world acknowledge the importance of collaboration in research and higher education, but they miss the insight of grassroots experiences at the micro (individual) and meso (institutional) level, be it the frozen cells for cancer research that thaw at border controls or concerns about the recognition of qualifications and accreditation. In this sense, the role of EU research diasporas in the EU-UK post-Brexit scenario illustrates a powerful case study to advocate for the value of research diasporas as key policy actors at a global scale. Scientific diasporas serve as an essential conduit for supplying key information and working towards problem solving in science and research policymaking, which constitutes a forward-thinking framework of diplomatic and scientific endeavors.

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