

ACADEMIA

European Science, Post-Brexit

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There is no way that having the United Kingdom, such an important element in the Old Continent's system of science, leave the EU will fail to have serious consequences affecting the other EU states.

The British are leaders in European science. This is evident in their superb universities, 118 Nobel laureates, and more than 1200 prestigious grants awarded by the European Research Council. The country can be proud of good statistics reflecting its level of innovation, such as the world's second-best score (after Switzerland) on the Global Innovation Index. Of the most-cited publications on the global scale, one-sixth have at least one British author. Due to these and other factors, British institutions have already secured 7 billion euro through competitions under the 2020 Horizon Framework Programme. They owe their success to superb traditions, to excellent research organization, and also to British scholars' great openness to collaboration with scientists and research teams from other countries, especially from the European Union.

So, what will happen after Brexit? There has never been such an experiment, and even if one tries to sift some sort of signals out of all the media hype, it is hard to tell what kind of scenario is likely. Huge concern can definitely be sensed among British scientists. They are afraid of losing access to EU research funding and having their ability to forge scientific alliances to secure such funding curtailed. They are worried that the political climate, the anti-immigration mood, and even downright xenophobic attitudes will cause capable researchers and students to choose research centers elsewhere, in other European countries. This fear is not unfounded, although of course we are unable to anticipate whether it might be a short-term trend or whether the magic of Oxford and Cambridge, the prestige of Imperial College or the London School of Economics may not survive in the longer term. It is hard to say how negotiations on the Erasmus student exchange program will end. The UK's potential exit from this program will greatly hamper students from the Continent from visiting the UK's prestigious research institutions, but it will also greatly complicate the mobility of British students. They could start to need formal visas, like everyone else from outside the EU. Moreover, potential problems in obtaining funding through EU projects could cause British research centers to become less attractive.

Although some scientists are pointing to positive aspects of becoming liberated from very strict EU reg-

ulations, particularly in clinical, pharmaceutical, and GMO-related research. In their view, greater flexibility could help speed up research in British universities. But will they truly take the great risk of dismantling the various control measures agreed upon by the EU countries?

There is no way that having such an important element in the Old Continent's science system leave the EU will fail to have serious consequences affecting the other EU states. The consequences of Brexit will also, or perhaps most prominently, be felt by the Poles, for whom the United Kingdom (alongside the United States) is the main direction chosen by university students, various grant-winners, and numerous mature, often top-caliber scientists. According to the UK Council for International Student Affairs, more than 5000 individuals from Poland were studying in the United Kingdom in the 2015/2016 academic year. The United Kingdom usually recruited the very best, and that will definitely have an impact on efforts to improve the caliber of Polish science.

There are many projects under the 2020 Horizon Framework Program in which Polish and British researchers are collaborating closely. Such cooperation is also pursued on the back of bilateral agreements, both formal and informal. I do not suspect that the current projects could come under threat, but what about the future? Will the ease (still insufficient, in my opinion) with which such cooperative ties are now forged not come up against new administrative and, even more dangerously, psychological barriers? The doubt being cast on the benefits of globalization, which are so important for the advancement of science, and the Euro-skeptic views of politicians in both countries could have a negative impact on our collaboration. And that would have terrible consequences. We still have a lot to learn from our British colleagues. The gap that separates us in terms of effectively winning EU projects is colossal.

However, a potential weakening of British science's position as a consequence of Brexit (although it is not inevitable) would be very bad for the whole of European science. It would diminish European institutions' chances in successfully competing against American ones, and also against the ever-stronger and well-equipped centers in Asia. ■