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A Single-Issue Party without an Issue?
UKIP and British 2017 General Election[1]

Monika Brusenbauch Meislová[2]

Abstract:

The article researches an interesting phenomenon of the fall of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) – the most successful populist right-wing party in British history. After soaring relatively high in British politics, in 2017 general election UKIP suffered a sharp drop from its electoral peaks. The inquiry explores UKIP's 2017 electoral results and demographics of its support (or lack thereof) and examines some of the reasons behind Party's collapse. More specifically, it focuses on three aspects of UKIP's 2017 performance: 1) party's message; 2) party's leadership and 3) party's election campaign. The article also discusses which British political party(ies) has/have benefited most from UKIP's spectacular defeat and reflects on Party's future prospects.

Key words: *United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP); 2017 general election; populism; euroscepticism; in/out referendum*

Introduction

As the most successful populist right-wing party in British history (Kaufman 2017: 57), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has been a very interesting phenomenon in British politics. At the 2015 British general election, UKIP delivered "*one of the most impressive performances by a challenger party in British history*" (Goodwin, Cutts 2017), winning 3.8 million votes and 12.6 percent of the vote share, making it the third[3] biggest party. Its rise was, indeed, "*one of the most dramatic and widely discussed features of British politics in recent years*" (Hayton 2016: 400). Yet, merely two years later, UKIP was reduced to a small fraction of this, having polled only 1.8 percent of the vote share in the 2017 General Election. Thus, within a time span of mere two years, the Party went from the top of its electoral performance to the bottom.

2017 UK General Election which was held only one year after the polarizing vote to withdraw the UK from the European Union (Mellon et al. 2017: 1) was "*one of the most*

[2] Dr Monika Brusenbauch Meislová is an assistant professor and researcher based at the Department of International Relations and European Studies at Masaryk University Brno in the Czech Republic (Joštova 10, 602 00, Brno). She cooperates externally also with Palacký University Olomouc. Contact: brusenbauch.meislova@mail.muni.cz.

[3] In terms of the overall vote share, UKIP finished third and the Liberal Democrats (the traditional third party of the British political system) fourth, but the Liberal Democrats won seven more seats than UKIP (Thrasher et al. 2016: 3).

astonishing British general elections ever" (Dorey 2017: 308). Widely labelled as the "*Brexit election*", it was the election that did not need to be called (Heath, Goodwin 2017: 2). Having repeatedly and frequently ruled out a snap election, Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May surprisingly announced on 18 April 2017 that an election would be held on 8 June 2017. The professed reason for the election was to secure a clear and enhanced mandate from the British electorate for her Government in forthcoming Brexit negotiations and provide a strong mandate for her vision of Brexit that she had outlined in her speech at Lancaster House in January 2017 (Dorey 2017: 309; Heath, Goodwin 2017: 3; Mellon et al. 2017: 2).[4] At the time of the snap election announcement, an average Conservative lead in the polls stood at almost 20 percent, with frequents talks of a Tory landslide victory (BBC 2017c).

Yet, the electoral results produced "*one of the biggest shocks in British electoral history*" (Dorey 2017: 308), with most of the opinion polls having failed to predict its outcome. As Heath and Goodwin (2017: 1) commented: "*In June, Britain went to the polls for a nation-wide vote for the third time in two years, and for the third time the result confounded most expectations*". Not only did the Conservatives failed to increase its majority but the results produced a hung parliament, the Conservative Party lost its parliamentary majority (winning just 318 seats, i.e. eight short of the majority target of 326) and had to make a deal with the Democratic Unionist Party (BBC 2017e).

UKIP's epic defeat in 2017 general election calls for closer examination of the reasons explaining such a pronounced electoral debacle. This paper therefore analyses UKIP's electoral results and examines some of the reasons behind the Party's collapse at the 2017 general election. Based on the review of the existing academic literature on UKIP's upsurge, the article identifies three factors that were important prerequisites of party's electoral fortunes: 1) party's message; 2) party's leadership and 3) party's election campaign. Subsequently, it is within these three areas that UKIP's 2017 performance is explored.

As such, this inquiry is one of the first attempts to provide a detailed academic account of UKIP's performance in 2017 elections. As of now, the extant scholarly literature does not cover the issue (which is, of course, not surprising, given that the election took place only in June 2017) and only a handful of rather brief (if illuminating and important, as they undoubtedly push forward our understanding of the issue) blogposts, commentaries and early reflections (for instance, Ewen 2017; Glynn 2018; Johnston, Pattie 2017; Usherwood 2017 amongst others) and Politico articles (see Dickson 2017; Goodwin 2018; Goodwin, Cutts 2017 as examples) have dedicated their attention to the analysis of UKIP's 2017 failure. This paper builds further on them whilst attempting to provide a more complex (albeit not a complete) picture of UKIP's 2017 electoral performance.

The article unfolds in the following manner. To provide a proper context for further analysis, it begins by describing UKIP's general background and identifying key factors behind its electoral rise. The second part briefly investigates demographics of UKIP's support (or lack thereof) in 2017 election, comparing its performance with the situation two

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[4] Announcing the election, Theresa May declared: "*At this moment of enormous national significance there should be unity here in Westminster, but instead there is division. The country is coming together, but Westminster is not.* […] *Our opponents believe because the government's majority is so small, that our resolve will weaken and that they can force us to change course. They are wrong.* […] *If we do not hold a general election now their political game-playing will continue, and the negotiations with the European Union will reach their most difficult stage in the run-up to the next scheduled election* […] *So we need a general election and we need one now, because we have at this moment a one-off chance to get this done while the European Union agrees its negotiating position and before the detailed talks begin*" (May 2017).

years ago. The subsequent part explores UKIP's 2017 performance in relation to three aspects, including 1) party's message; 2) party's leadership and 3) party's election campaign. The fourth part (titled Cui Bono? aka For Whose Benefit?) discusses which British political party(ies) has/have benefited most from UKIP's collapse. Drawing on this analysis, the final part of the article sums up the whole inquiry, discussing implications of UKIP's 2017 heavy defeat and reflecting on Party's future prospects.

Looking into UKIP's Rise

UKIP has been largely identified as a populist right-wing single-issue party (Goodwin, Milazzo 2015: 11; Hayton, 2010; Usherwood 2008; Tournier-Sol 2015: 140; van Kessel 2015; Webb, Bale 2014). Its rise "*from the fringes to the political mainstream*" has been "*undeniably transformative for the shape of British politics*" (Glynn 2018), captivating UK's political and media class (Ford, Goodwin 2014b: 277; for more on that matter, see among others Daniel 2005 or Goodwin, Milazzo 2015).

UKIP's surge picked up votes from both the Conservatives and the Labour Party, with its populist, nationalist message resonating with an electorate (both from right and left) disenchanted with mainstream politics (Moufahim, Parsons, Rees 2016: 262; New Statesman 2017). Its support used to be strongest in areas where the population was mainly if not overwhelmingly British-born (Geddes 2014: 292). Also, the Party has traditionally drawn much of its electoral support from the so-called "*left-behind*" voters. This term denotes "*older, blue-collar workers, with little education and few skills; groups who have been 'left behind' by the economic and social transformation of Britain in recent decades, and pushed to the margins as the main parties have converged in the centre ground* [...] *angry and disaffected working class Britons of all political backgrounds, who have lost faith in a political system that ceased to represent them long ago*" (Ford, Goodwin 2014a: 270).[5]

The Party faced an uphill battle to get noticed by the electorate. Since 2010, however, UKIP was continuously building up popular support and enhanced its position as an alternative to the main political parties. It also started to overtake the Liberal Democrats in poll ratings, put Conservative backbenchers at risk of losing their marginal seats and performed strongly at the 2013 local elections when it received 23 percent of the votes and increased the number of its councillors from 8 to 147 (Brusenbauch Meislová 2017: 64; Erlanger and Castle, 2016; Tournier-Sol 2015: 140). Yet, this growth had not been reflected in British national elections, where UKIP "*historically failed to make an electoral breakthrough*" (Moufahim, Parsons, Rees 2016: 262). For instance, in the general election of 2001 UKIP polled only 1.5 percent of the overall vote share, increasing its gains only marginally to 3.2 percent in 2010.

This trend was reversed in 2014, when the Party won the European Parliament elections with over 4.3 million votes and a share of 26.6 percent[6] as well as its first elected parliamentary

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[5] Similarly, in the words of Glynn (2018), this term refers to "*a substantial constituency of poorer socioeconomic groups and those who espouse traditional values who had been all but abandoned by the liberal consensus in domestic and international politics*" (Glynn 2018).

[6] It was also "*the first nationwide election victory for a new party since Ramsay MacDonald led Labour to its general election success in 1929, and the first occasion since 1906 on which a party other than Labour or the Conservatives won the highest share of the vote in a nationwide election*" (Ford, Goodwin 2014b: 277).

member – Douglas Carswell – at 2014 Clacton by-election (Cushion, Thomas, Ellis 2015: 314; Ford, Goodwin 2014b: 277; Moufahim, Parsons, Rees 2016: 262). UKIP's rise culminated in 2015 general elections. Standing at the height of its electoral performance, the Party delivered "*the most impressive result for an independent new party since the rise of the Labour Party in the 1920s*" (Cutts, Goodwin, Milazzo 2017: 70).[7] Broadening of UKIP's appeal and the surge in its support did, indeed, cause an earthquake in British politics, as predicted (rather accurately) by UKIP's leader, Nigel Farage, at the party conference in 2013 (Chorley 2013).

If one studies contemporary scholarship on UKIP's upsurge, there are three distinctive aspects that seem to particularly stand out when trying to explain the steady rise in UKIP support. These include: 1) party's message (for instance, Crines, Heppel 2017; Cutts, Ford, Goodwin 2011; Evans, Mellon, 2016; Ford, Goodwin 2014; Ford, Goodwin, Cutts 2012; Lynch, Whitaker 2013; van Kessel 2015; Whitaker, Lynch, 2011); 2) party's leadership (for instance, Crines, Heppell 2017; Evans, Mellon 2015; Ford, Goodwin 2014; Geddes 2014; Kenny 2014; Tournier-Sol 2015) and 3) party's election campaign (for instance, Cushion, Thomas, Ellis 2015; Deacon et al. 2017; Ford, Goodwin 2014; Goodwin 2015; Towler 2017).

Regarding the first factor, UKIP's message has effectively combined Euroscepticism, anti-immigration policies and populism. With the Party founded as a single-issue party campaigning for Britain's departure from the EU, this policy has constituted its very *raison d'être* (Tournier-Sol 2015: 142; see also further below) and even though the party later (especially since the early 2000s) widened its electoral platform – notably by incorporating several elements of the Conservative tradition (Tournier-Sol 2015: 144; cf. Lynch, Whitaker 2013) – advocating UK's exit from the EU did remain its core policy. Another (albeit inextricably linked to the first one) principal part of its policy programme has been a hard-line policy on immigration. As Tourier-Sol (2015: 146) argues: "*The party has successfully connected its core policy on Europe, which is a low salience issue for British voters, to immigration – which on the contrary is a high salience issue for the electorate*" (similarly also Crines, Heppel 2017: 234; Goodwin 2015: 15; Lynch, Whitaker 2013; Lynch, Whittaker, Loomes 2012). Accusing the EU of being the main cause of immigration into the UK and condemning open-door immigration from Eastern EU member states, UKIP explicitly "*fuelled resentment against the immigrants or EU migrants who were deemed to be 'taking' working-class jobs, driving-down wages and placing a greatly increased 'burden' on already overstretched public services, most notably education, the NHS and housing*" (Dorey 2017: 327; for detailed analysis of UKIP and the politics of immigration see, for example, Geddes 2014; Kaufman 2017). Apart from that, the Party has also advocated for deregulation, lower taxes, cuts in public sector jobs, a stricter policy on law and order, increases in the defence budget, creation of new grammar schools or introduction of an English parliament. At the same time, it has opposed the idea of wind farms, multiculturalism, same-sex marriages as well as military interventions in foreign wars (Tournier-Sol 2015: 146). All of this has been combined with a populist anti-establishment strategy along the lines of the "*repetition of a popular populist refrain: ordinary people are being sold out by an out-of-touch political elite*" (Geddes 2014: 292).[8]

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[7] Yet, despite receiving more than an eighth of all votes, the party did not receive an electorally relevant share of seats. On the contrary. Under the single member plurality/first-past-the-post system it (in)famously secured only a single seat (in Clanton) in what was "*the harshest treatment that our capricious electoral system has ever inflicted on a nationwide party*" (Goodwin, Cutts 2017; in a like manner also Cutts, Goodwin, Milazzo 2017: 70).

[8] As Tournier-Sol (2015: 149) accentuates, UKIP was "*explicitly founded as a populist party*".

Secondly, as far as the party's leadership is concerned, it was especially the popularity of Nigel Farage, UKIP's charismatic and highly visible leader (2006–2009; 2010–2016) that helped mobilise the votes for UKIP. In Crines' and Heppell's words: "*UKIP have in Farage, the inspirational figurehead that Mudde argues populist movements need as a precursor to success (Mudde, 2004)*" (Crines, Heppell 2017: 3). For Evans and Mellon (2015: 10), Farage had the capacity to "*boost the electoral prospects of the party he leads to a greater degree than any other party leader*". Indeed, Farage has been long seen as "*a figure that changed the course of British politics*" and "*an icon that embodies the coarsening of public discourse in the neoliberal era*" (Ewen 2016). In Ewen's (2016) words: "*In light of the referendum result, it is no exaggeration to rank Farage as one of the most significant figures in modern British history. His has been an extraordinary rise*. [...] *Farage has stamped his authority on his party, professionalised the outfit, and become a celebrity politician whose image as a supposed anti-establishment man of the people is constantly lapped up and spat out by a media with endless airtime to fill and a desperation for novelty in an era dominated by bland, career politicians*" (Ewen 2016).

Thirdly, it is the electoral campaign that often assumes a decisive role in influencing the electoral outcomes. Indeed, it has been well established that the more effort invested into a campaign, the greater the electoral return (Cutts, Goodwin, Milazzo 2017: 71; Fieldhouse, Cutts 2009; Pattie Johnston 2009). In 2015, UKIP put a great deal of effort into the campaign, contesting almost every seat (Goodwin 2015). It was deemed one of the four major parties and granted a place in TV election debates (thus being effectively elevated to a similar status as the three mainstream political parties – the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats; Roberts 2017; similarly also Cushion, Thomas, Ellis 2015: 314; Deacon et al. 2017b: 184–186). Also, Nigel Farage managed to create a very strong bond with the media.

This article limits itself to exploring UKIP's 2017 performance in relation to these three areas only, fully acknowledging that there are, of course, many other factors that have impacted UKIP's electoral results, too.

Examining UKIP's 2017 Election Results

Even though pre-general election polls were not a good guide to the election outcome, with the electoral results having defied most of the predictions, they were more accurate (if not entirely accurate; see further below) in terms of predicting UKIP's failure. The article argues that, with the benefit of hindsight, there were at least three worrying signs that were indicative of how badly UKIP would score in the 2017 election. First of all, there was a sharp decline in UKIP's popular support. Shortly ahead of the in/out referendum, the Party soared to 17–19 percent of voting intentions (Goodwin, Cutts 2017) and in June 2016 (i.e. in the month in which the referendum was held) its support stood at 16 percent. Yet, after May's decision to call a general election, its ratings dipped quickly and UKIP saw them steadily decline to as low as 2 percent (Survation), 4 percent (Ipsos Mori; Kantar Public) or 5 percent (BMG; ComRes; ICM; Opinion; Panelbase; YouGov) in the final pre-election polls (Barnes 2017). As one can see, on average, the pre-election polls overstated UKIP's actual results, predicting that UKIP would do about twice as well than it actually did in the end. Secondly, another worrying sign was a substantial slump in UKIP's membership which fell from 45,994 at the time of 2015 general election to 39,000 in 2016 (New Statesman 2017). On top of that, in March 2017, in what was a medialised affair, UKIP lost its sole remaining Member of

Parliament (MP), Douglas Carswell, who explained his decision to quit the Party as seeing "*no point to the party anymore*" (New Statesman 2017). Carswell became an independent MP and did not stand in the June 8 election. Thirdly, the Party lost the vast majority of its local councillors, managing to keep only one seat (Lancashire County Council) at the local council elections in May 2017, whilst losing 145 of them (BBC 2017d). Inevitably, this performance did mirror its slide in pre-election opinion polls.

As already noted earlier, UKIP was heavily decimated in 2017 general election. As the Table 1 reflects, it secured only 1.8 percent of the national vote (approximately over a half of million votes) with a 10.8 percent drop in vote share, effectively returning to its 2001 levels.

Table 1: UKIP's 2015 and 2017 General Election Results

	Vote [%]	Vote [%] change	Seats	Seats change
2015	12.6	+9.7	1	+1
2017	1.8	−10.8	0	-1

Source: *Author, based on The Electoral Commission 2015, 21017.*

UKIP lost its only seat, in Clanton, to the Conservative Party with a 36.8 percent fall in vote share (BBC 2017b). Also, the number of seats in which the Party polled at least 10 percent of the vote share plummeted from 450 to only 2 (the northern Labour-held seat of Hartlepool and the eastern Conservative-held seat of Thurrock; Heath, Goodwin 2017: 2). And even though the share of parties other than the Conservatives or Labour generally declined (from 32 percent in 2015 to 17.5 percent in 2017), it was UKIP's collapse that was especially noticeable.[9] As we can see from Table 2 that demonstrates the degree of support (or the lack of it) for UKIP among various groups, UKIP's vote share dropped across the board, largely among its biggest 2015 supporters.

Table 2: Demographics of UKIP's Support in 2015 and 2017 General Elections

		2015 [%]	2017 [%]	% change
Gender	Male	15	2	−13
	Female	12	1	−11
Age	18–29	9	3	−6
	30–39	10	1	−9
	40–49	14	2	−12
	50–59	16	3	−13
	60+	16	4	−12
Social Grade	AB	9	1	−8
	C1	11	1	−10
	C2	17	2	−15
	DE	18	4	−14
Work sector	Private	14	2	−12
	Public	11	2	−9

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[9] Interestingly, according to the Gallagher index, the 2017 election was the least disproportional election since 1955 and by far the least disproportional since 1974 (Renwick 2017: 12).

		2015 [%]	2017 [%]	% change
Newspaper Read Most Often*	Express	27	3	−24
	Daily Mail	19	3	−16
	Mirror	9	2	−7
	Daily Star	26	3	−23
	Sun	19	3	−16
	Daily Telegraph	12	1	−11
	Guardian	1	0	−1
	Independent	4	1	−3
	Times	6	1	−5

Note: * The Financial Times has been excluded from the analysis, as the data relating to 2015 was not available.
Source: *Author, based on YouGov 2015; YouGov 2017.*

Let us now take a closer look at the demographics of UKIP's failure. Although the electoral support for UKIP collapsed among all age groups, its loss was most apparent among the older cohort of voters who used to be a major source of UKIP's support: 13 percent and 12 percent less than 2015 in the 50–59 and 60+ and 40–49 cohorts, respectively. The lowest drop in UKIP's vote was registered among the youngest cohort of voters (−6 percent). 30–39 age cohort's support for UKIP was 9 percent lower in 2017 than it was in 2015.

As further illustrated in Table 2, UKIP experienced considerable losses in electoral support among all socioeconomic categories/social classes in the 2017 general election, but its fall was biggest among the working classes. More specifically, especially among the C2s (the skilled working class) and DEs (unskilled and semi-skilled workers), with drops of 15 and 14 percentage points on UKIP's performance in 2015, respectively. The lowest decrease of 8 percent was identified among ABs (professional and managerial). In case of C1s (routine middle class), only 1 percent of this socioeconomic category voted UKIP in 2017, compared to 11 percent in 2015.

A similar pattern of UKIP's substantial collapse manifested itself also in terms of its support according to work sector. By way of comparison, down from 14 percent to 2 percent in the private sector and from 11 percent to 2 percent in the public sector.

Regarding newspaper readership, public support for UKIP fell among the readers of all daily national newspapers, with the largest decrease being among tabloid readers. It was especially The Express and The Daily Star readers whose support for UKIP fell most dramatically (by 24 percent and 23 percent, respectively). Support of the Daily Mail and the Sun readership fell by 16 percent. The lowest drop in UKIP's support occurred among readers of the Guardian (from 1 percent in 2015 to 0 percent in 2017), the Independent (−3 percent) and the Times (−5 percent).

UKIP's support plummeted even in seats where it might have been expected to score relatively well. This was especially notable in the Lincolnshire constituency of Boston and Skegness which registered the highest British 'Leave' result in the 2016 referendum (at 75.6 percent). Besides, in 2015 general election, the UKIP candidate had pushed the Labour Party into third place here, gaining 14,645 votes, and a 33 percent of the vote share (Dorey 2017: 324). Being generally deemed as UKIP's most likely seat to win, Boston and Skegness was also the constituency in which UKIP's leader, Paul Nuttall, was contesting a seat. Yet, the favourable political context notwithstanding, Nuttall finished as a distant third

in the Boston and Skegness seat with only 7.7 percent of the constituency vote share and 3,308 votes (BBC 2017a). With this being already Nuttall's second failed attempt to win a seat in the House of Commons (he lost his bid to gain a parliamentary seat in the Stoke Central by-election in February 2017), he resigned with immediate effect the day following the elections. In terms of individual nations, UKIP's vote share fell the most in England (down 12 percent) and Wales (down 11.6 percent; Garland, Terry 2017: 21, 25).

Exploring UKIP's Fall

In what follows, the article addresses UKIP's 2017 performance in relation to three aspects (party's message, leadership and election campaign) that used to be important drivers behind party's previous electoral fortunes.

Party's Message

As a hard-Eurosceptic party, characterized by a principled opposition to the EU, UKIP played a central role in pressuring an in/out referendum and featured prominently in the referendum campaign that produced a narrow majority for the Leave option. In fact, it was the very surge in public support for UKIP that partly accounted for David Cameron's pledge to hold the referendum in the first place. With the 2016 Leave's victory, however, the Party suddenly lost its defining policy goal – its very *raison d'etre*[10]. It had no longer any major role to play. After all, it was the promotion of one key aim – to bring about UK's withdrawal from the EU – that stood at its very birth (Hayton 2016: 400).[11] It is worth repeating that even though UKIP later tried to broaden its appeal and range of policies beyond that of a single-issue party, British exit from the EU remained "*its overriding objective and the lens through which most of its other policy positions are framed and understood*", with the commitment to withdrawal from the EU remaining "*the first principle enshrined in the party's constitution*" (Hayton 2016: 400). Goodwin (2018) is, too, of a similar mind, arguing that campaigning for a referendum was UKIP's "*only focus*".

This helps explain why the removal of the EU issue was "*a real blow*" (Usherwood 2017) to the Party. As Usherwood (2017) succinctly explains: "*UKIP has never had an ideological core: instead it has attracted the disillusioned and the disaffected from across the political spectrum* [...] *Taking away one of the few things that was broadly agreed – that the EU is a bad thing – gives even less common ground to share*". This has had an important consequence, with UKIP experiencing a sort of existential crisis in the aftermath of the in/out referendum (Dorey 2017: 324). To demonstrate its continuing relevance to the broad platform of supporters that it had previously built up and to maintain its party distinctiveness,

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[10] Johnston and Pattie (2017: 30) are, by contrast, not that radical, claiming that UKIP's *raison d'ętre* merely "*eroded*".
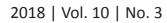
[11] The Party was founded in 1993 by "*some members of the Anti-Federalist League, which had been formed two years earlier by Dr Alan Sked, an academic from the London School of Economics and Political Science, in order to oppose the Maastricht Treaty*" (Tournier-Sol 2015: 142). As Goodwin and Milazzo (2015: 2) note in their book: "*The party had been formed by political amateurs who felt intensely anxious about Britain's integration into the EU—or what many saw as an undemocratic superstate that posed a fundamental threat to British sovereignty. Many of the founders were former Conservatives who admired politicians like Margaret Thatcher but felt that their old party had failed to protect Britain's independence*".

UKIP needed to identify a new purpose. As a result, it adopted a self-proclaimed guard-dog role of Brexit to ensure that the Party get the Brexit that it really wanted and that there was no back-tracking on it (Nuttall 2017). Relatedly, in the election campaign, which was generally deemed "*nasty and short*" (Foster 2017: 105) the UKIP backed the hardest possible Brexit (UKIP 2017).

Yet, it failed to deliver the message, because between the autumn of 2016 and the 2017 election campaign the Conservative Part launched "*a succession of populist interventions and policy proposals designed to lure back traditional social conservatives who had defected to UKIP or felt alienated by Cameron's 'modernisation'*" (Heath, Goodwin 2017: 3). More specifically, in the wake of the EU referendum, the Conservatives adopted a clear pro-Brexit stance (Evans 2018) and made it a centrepiece of their official strategy. Most importantly, Theresa May made sure that the Conservatives were viewed as a party delivering Brexit, so famously epitomized in her oft-repeated "*Brexit-means-Brexit phrase*", vowing that there was no going back on the Brexit process. So, despite the fact that Brexit was "*barely discussed as an issue by key figures during the campaign*", with the discussion focusing on "*a wide variety of other policy issues including social care, fox hunting, responses to terrorist attacks, and austerity*" (Mellon et al. 2017: 2; in a like manner also Hutton 2017; Snowdon 2017), it was in this sense that Theresa May and the Conservative Party effectively "*owned*" Brexit (Evans 2018). This May's tactics was largely motivated by a bid to attract former UKIP-supporting Leave voters (Evans 2018), because in order to secure a larger majority than David Cameron in 2015 she needed to try and appeal to those who backed Brexit but had voted for other parties in 2015. Essentially, it was UKIP that became the key target (Johnston, Pattie 2017: 30). As a result, UKIP failed to seize the ownership of the Brexit issue, its (self-proclaimed) distinctive role as the guard dog of Brexit became redundant and the Party was being increasingly portrayed as a party without a purpose.

Yet, it was not only the repeated insistence on the hard Brexit by means of which the Conservatives tried to draw in former UKIP supporters and deprive UKIP of its party distinctiveness. It was also the accent that they put on the immigration issue. With the EU referendum and Conservatives' adoption of a hard Brexit, the chief obstacle to a credible Conservative policy on immigration was removed and the immigration competence gap between UKIP and the Conservative Party narrowed dramatically (Mellon et al. 2017: 20). In Robert's (2017) words: "*Ms May has appeared to park her tanks firmly on Ukip's lawn with tough talk on immigration*". Once again, perception of UKIP's competence on one of its key policy issues heavily eroded. UKIP supporters, who have long been concerned about immigration (as detailed in Chapter *Looking into UKIP's Rise*), recognised this change in credibility, with more than 80 percent of 2015 UKIP voters who believed that the Conservative Party would successfully reduce immigration voting for them in 2017 (Evans 2018; Mellon et al. 2017: 22). Thus, it was this "*new-found credibility on immigration control*" which was "*the key to their being able to effectively wipe out UKIP*" (Evans 2018). Besides, also Conservatives' criticism of liberal elites and advocating for more grammar schools appealed to UKIP electorate (Goodwin, Cutts 2017). The effects of the above-described shifts were clearly visible in UKIP's dropping poll rates since Theresa May's call for a snap election.

May's strategy certainly paid off, as the Conservative Party succeeded in capturing the UKIP vote and absorbed much of UKIP's support (for more on this, see Chapter *Cui Bono?*), especially in the North. UKIP, by contrast, suffered badly from a lack of perceived competence, influence and distinctiveness (especially in terms of the key issues of

Brexit and immigration), with former UKIP voters no longer believing that the Party was in a position to deliver much of its manifesto. For Heath and Goodwin (2017: 6), it was the Conservatives' hard-line approach to Brexit – and especially appealing to UKIP voters as such – that seems to have impacted how well they did.

Party's Leadership

In the context of 2017 election, UKIP's credibility was severely undermined by the prolonged period of bitter infighting, internal feuding and scandals that the Party (and, in particular, its leadership) entered soon after the British in/out referendum (Goodwin 2018; Roberts 2017). The chaos was prompted by the unexpected decision of Nigel Farage to step down as a party leader in July 2016. Finding Farage's successor was handled poorly by UKIP, with his departure unleashing "*a rather undignified scramble for the top spot*" (Dickson 2017) and highlighting "*the lack of credible and visible faces in the party: it was a mark of his time as leader that any such challenges to his dominance were kept firmly to one side*" (Usherwood 2017).

UKIP has faced multiple leadership crises ever since (De la Baume 2018), lacking visible and persuasive leadership. Farage was succeeded by Diane James who stood down as a UKIP leader only 18 days after replacing him. Paul Nuttall led the party from November 2016 to June 2017 to be followed by its current leader, Henry Bolton. Yet, as will be shown in the following sub-chapter, Nuttall did not manage to create a strong bond with the voters (and the media alike; Ewen 2017). Widely considered much less popular among the electorate than Farage (Statista 2017), his popularity was far from being a source of electoral advantage for the Party. In this context, though, it is worth recalling that UKIP has not been unfamiliar with internal disputes and leadership challenges: "*the party's ruling body has never proven itself able to master the art of stability — during its 25 years of existence, the party has whittled through no less than 14 elected or acting leaders*" (Goodwin 2018).

Furthermore, UKIP's image was not helped by reports of Nigel Farage's and Arron Banks' (UKIP's former principal donor) attempts to set up a new political movement (Booth 2017). This was underpinned by Banks' increasingly outspoken attacks on UKIP, as exemplified by his accusations of the party being run like "*a jumble sale*" or "*a squash club committee*" or comments about Nuttall's leadership that "*couldn't knock the skin off a rice pudding*" (The Guardian 2017).

Party's Election Campaign

Theresa May's decision to call a snap election did not play into hands of UKIP's process of „*reinventing itself*". As Usherwood (2017) observes, Nuttall "*simply lacked any time to get his message bedded down with the electorate*". Moreover, during the campaign, UKIP – as a party which has traditionally relied on grassroots memberships to "*put in the campaigning legwork*" (New Statesman 2017) – severely suffered from the sharp decline in membership.

Overall, UKIP featured much less prominently in the 2017 campaign than it did two years ago. Indeed, the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture conducted an audit of election campaign coverage in the 5th May–7th June 2017 period and came up with a conclusion according to which the 2017 election campaign was characterized by a "*two-party squeeze*" whereby the Conservatives and Labour both received much more coverage on TV and in the press than they did in 2015 (84 percent of all appearances in the press and

67 percent on TV; Deacon et al. 2017a: 40). UKIP's struggle for a significant place in the pre-election political debate contrasted heavily with 2015. In a marked contrast to Farage, Nuttall, UKIP's leader at the 2017 election, failed to create the same bond with the media, with the mainstream media largely ignoring him (Usherwood 2017; Ewen 2017: 132). As an aside, UKIP was basically the only political party which abstained from using videos to communicate political messages on Facebook during the 2017 campaign, having "*barely attempted any significant engagement with their more than 500,000 followers*" (Walsh 2017: 96).

Last but not least, Ewen (2017: 132) also blames Paul Nuttall's performance and radicalisation in the 2017 election campaign: "*Nuttall's rhetoric become increasingly extreme, pressing for the return of capital punishment and for the total ban of the burqa, in a 'desperate attempt to stay relevant'. This was unreconstructed masculinity eating itself*".

UKIP's failure was further buttressed by its decision to field far fewer candidates than it did in 2015. In a marked contrast to the situation two years ago, the number of UKIP's candidates fell from 624 to 377, with UKIP standing candidates in little more than half of all constituencies (Heath, Goodwin 2017: 2; Roberts 2017). Struggling to find candidates, UKIP entered an unofficial coalition pact, with Paul Nuttall announcing that the Party will not contest seats with strongly Eurosceptic/pro-Brexit MPs or where a Conservative challenger had a good chance to overthrow a pro-EU MP of any other political party (Alexander 2017: 79; Garland, Terry, 2017: 16; Roberts 2017). Nuttall classified the decision to step aside as "*the noble thing*" and "*putting country before party*": "*Where branches have campaigned with candidates or MPs on Vote Leave platforms or Leave.EU platforms during the referendum, and they have had conversations since and they are convinced they are real Brexiteers, then they would have taken a decision to stand down to ensure we get as many Brexit MPs into the House of Commons. I think it is a very noble thing to do, to put country above party*" (Roberts 2017). Inevitably, this "*uneasy alliance*", as aptly termed by Alexander (2017: 79), strongly resembled a similar, likewise unofficial, pact with Conservative Eurosceptics in 2010 (Goodwin, Cutts 2017).

Consequently, UKIP only contested seats in certain constituencies, especially in those where the acting MP (regardless of party affiliation) was considered a non-Brexiteer (Dorey 2017: 324). It did not contest candidates in many Labour-held marginals, in most of which UKIP's 2015 vote gains surpassed Labour's majority, to assist Conservatives in those target seats. (Johnston, Pattie 2017: 30). This also partly helps explain why the pre-election polls failed to predict the sheer scale of UKIP's failure, as many of those who declared that they would vote UKIP did not know that there was no UKIP candidate in their constituency (Johnston, Pattie 2017: 30). Out of the 377 seats that UKIP contested, 29 were marginal and 26 held by Labour (Roberts 2017). Subsequently, the Conservative Party was able to gather votes from UKIP supporters in the traditionally Labour heartlands in the north and the midlands and several London marginal constituencies (Roberts 2017).

Relatedly, UKIP's decision to field fewer candidates was underpinned by the fact that Party has been struggling financially, with insiders suggesting that it was not only "*heavily in debt*" (BBC 2018), but "*perilously close to bankruptcy*" (Goodwin 2018). The sharp decline in membership numbers decreased the volume of member contributions and the decision of Arron Banks to quit his support also seriously impaired UKIP's financial situation.

Cui Bono?

Before the 2017 general election, commentators debated about whether UKIP's debacle would primarily benefit the Conservative Party or whether the UKIP vote would be distributed more evenly towards major parties in agreement with UKIP's more diverse origins (Ford and Goodwin 2016).[12] As it turned out, the election included a considerable amount of tactical voting (Garland, Terry, 2017: 15) and it was the Conservative Party that became the main beneficiary of UKIP's marked decline.

Indeed, much analysis points out to a strong correlation between the breakdown of the UKIP vote and elevated support for the Conservative Party (Heath, Goodwin 2017: 9), with six in ten 2015 UKIP voters having opted for the Conservative Party in 2017 and only two in ten having voted for UKIP again (Ipsos MORI 2017). Overall, 57 percent of 2015 UKIP voters opted for the Conservative Party two years later, thereby substantially increasing its share of votes (if not so much its number of seats; Dorey 2017: 324). In their analysis, which drew on aggregate-level data, Heath and Goodwin (2017) found out that the Conservatives made gains in constituencies that had previously voted for Leave and supported UKIP. It is also worth noting that the Conservatives performed well in constituencies in which UKIP lost a lot of votes but rather badly in places where UKIP lost only a few votes (Heath, Goodwin 2017: 9). Likewise, also Goodwin and Cutts (2017) opine that: "*The harsh reality for UKIP is that since the June 2016 referendum its revolt on the right has stalled and many traditional Tory voters who shifted their support to UKIP are now heading back in the other direction*". In this regard, an interesting role reversal has taken place, as it was the Conservatives that used to suffer most at the hands of UKIP's rise (for a detailed analysis thereof see, for instance, Evans, Mellon 2016; Webb, Bale 2014).

This said, what was surprising about June 8 election was the fact that ex-UKIP voters did not defect *en masse* to the Conservatives as originally envisaged (this point is well covered especially in Johnston, Pattie 2017 and Mckibbin 2017). So, even though there was not much of a pattern between UKIP's collapse and change in Labour's support (Heath, Goodwin 2017: 9; for a different opinion see Johnston, Pattie 2017), 18 percent of former UKIP voters abandoned the party for Labour in 2017 (Dorey 2017: 324). Interestingly, according to Mckibbin (2017: 382), there was an accidental element to this: "*Labour 'devised' a strategy, if not consciously, that was probably pretty effective in limiting the damage the decline of UKIP might have done to Labour. That was to accept a 'hard' Brexit but to combine it with an old-fashioned welfare-state social democracy familiar and acceptable to UKIP voters*".

Conclusion

After soaring relatively high in British politics, UKIP – (in)famously described by David Cameron, in his oft-cited quote from 2006, as a bunch of "*fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists*" (Driver 2011: 148) – has recently suffered a rather sharp fall from its electoral peaks. The inquiry explored UKIP's performance in 2017 general election – election, in the words of

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[12] According to Johnston, Pattie (2017: 30), the way in which behaviour of UKIP and its former supporters played a major role in 2017 elections was "*the big story of the 2017 election*", with many pollsters and analysts having "*seriously misread how 2015 UKIP and 2016 Brexit voters would vote in 2017*" (Johnston, Pattie 2017: 30).

Foster (2017: 105), dominated by *"slippery issues of identity, sovereignty, and nostalgia"*. As we could see, UKIP's heavy defeat was not entirely unexpected.

In an attempt to help understand Party's decreased electoral appeal, the article has addressed UKIP's 2017 performance in relation to three aspects, including 1) party's message; 2) party's leadership and 3) party's election campaign. In principle, UKIP lost the trust of its electorate and suffered badly from a lack of perceived competence and influence (especially in terms of the key issues of Brexit and immigration). What is worth noting in this context is that UKIP did tend to lose a host of its voters between elections also in the past but had previously manged to replace them successfully. With the EU referendum, however, UKIP's losses were more substantial, and no significant level of replacement took place (Mckibbin 2017: 9). Taken together, the story of the 2017 general election was the one "*of a sequence of switching*" (Mellon et al. 2017: 22). As was shown in the article, the election was characterised by strong switching along Brexit lines, with former UKIP voters defecting heavily to the Conservative Party in the aftermath of the in/out referendum (Mellon et al. 2017: 1). Yet, it is, once again, worth accentuating that UKIP former voters did not defect *en masse* to the Conservative Party, as some originally envisaged.

To what extent 2017 electoral results are a sign of UKIP's demise remains to be seen. They certainly prompted a flood of negative interpretations, with commentators declaring that UKIP "*could be finished*" (New Statesman 2017) or that it was "*nearly extinct*" (Foster 2017: 105). The Party has been also heralded by some as "*political honey bee' – that is to say, dying from its own sting*" (Glynn 2018). That invites an inevitable question: has UKIP become a victim of its own success?

The truth is that the way things currently are, UKIP's future prospects (both electoral and other) look rather bleak. Since 2017 general election, UKIP's party machinery has been in disarray and its current leader has been far from controversy-free. To give just one example: in the wake of the June 8 election result, Henry Bolton was elected party's new leader in September 2017 (the third one since the in/out referendum). Yet, in January 2018 UKIP's ruling national executive committee unanimously passed a vote of no confidence in him, as Bolton faced repeated calls to step down over offensive racist messages about Prince Harry's future wife Meghan Markle sent by his former girlfriend (BBC 2018; De la Baume 2018). Yet, so far, Bolton has insisted he would defy the committee and continue as leader, as a contest would finish the party (BBC 2018).

What is more, UKIP's current leadership crisis has been accompanied by January 2018 reports that Farage plans to establish "*UKIP 2.0*" — a new, pro-Brexit party that would keep up pressure for a hard Brexit (Sholli 2018). As Goodwin (2018) rightly asserts, "*Such a move, were it to materialize, would instantly kill off UKIP. Every single leadership candidate whom Farage has backed has won while everybody who Farage has disliked has ended up resigning or being pushed out* […] *The unwritten rule in UKIP land says: 'Nigel always wins'. Were he to start a new party, most of UKIP's membership would follow him*" (Goodwin 2018).

Last but not least, UKIP's loss of representation in the House of Commons will be soon accompanied by loss of its longstanding base of operations in the European Parliament, which has given its "*both credibility and financing*" (Usherwood 2017). With the prospect of losing EU funding, UKIP will have to rely, more than ever, on member contributions and large donors (Usherwood 2017).

On balance, however, some accounts have offered a more optimistic outlook. Most prominently, it was Nigel Farage who declared that "*UKIP will survive*" (New Statesman

2017) and who interpreted the hung parliament as providing UKIP with a unique political opportunity – as "*a huge gap*" that "*opens in the political landscape for Ukip once again*" (The Telegraph 2017). In this context, also Simon Usherwood (2017) reminds us that UKIP has proven resilience in the past: **"**[...] *the history of the party should give pause for thought, before we write it off. On several occasions before now, UKIP has suffered very strong reversals of fortune and deep internal splits. While bitterly fought, none of these situations brought about UKIP's collapse*" (Usherwood 2017). Usherwood (2017) also tones down the impact of Farage's departure: "*It is important to remember that UKIP's success was built not on the personality of Farage, but on the widespread sense of dissatisfaction with other parties*". In conclusion, he adds a further important insight, remarking that there is still much potential for a more populist electoral niche in British politics which is even likely to grow as the practical problems linked to Brexit will become more palpable in future. Therefore, he does not completely rule out the possibility that UKIP might, once again, embark on a more successful course: "*If UKIP can ride out this current storm and reestablish itself as a viable avenue for protest, then it stands a chance of making this just one more bump in the road of its development*" (Usherwood 2017). And even if UKIP was, in the end, really finished as an electoral force, its influence on the British politics will be undoubtedly felt for many months and years to come (cf. New Statesman 2017).

Let me conclude the inquiry by acknowledging its limitations. It is necessary to reiterate the fact that the article has limited itself to exploring three aspects of UKIP's 2017 performance only (party's message, leadership and election campaign). At the same time, however, all the three features under scrutiny here are definitely worthy of further, more nuanced reflexion. Also, establishing their relative weight in determining UKIP's 2017 electoral results is beyond the scope of this article but might be a fruitful avenue for onward research. Last but not least, to provide a more complex picture, further research is needed to identify and explore also other underlying drivers behind UKIP's lamentable performance in 2017 and voter realignment.

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