

# Boris Johnson is damaging Germany's goodwill towards the UK

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*Despite Germany's long-standing respect for its British partners, the Federal Republic trades more with the EU27 than it does with the UK and it has a profound ideological commitment to European integration that is seldom appreciated in Britain. [Charlotte Galpin](#) writes that in this context, Boris Johnson may be doing more harm than good by taking German support towards UK trade for granted.*



'We're used to respecting foreign ministers a lot', said Wolfgang Schäuble, the German finance minister in response to Boris Johnson's claim that the 'automatic trade-off' between the EU's single market and freedom of movement was '[complete baloney](#)'. Mr Schäuble offered to send Johnson a copy of the Lisbon Treaty, suggesting he come to London and personally teach him, in 'good English', the rules of the European community.

That the German Finance Minister suggests he might not respect the British Foreign Secretary is striking for two countries whose relationship has generally been shaped by a '[mutual sense of respect](#)'. The British-German relationship has become strained in recent years in the context of David Cameron's attempted 'renegotiation' of the UK's EU membership. As [Janning](#) highlights, the two countries share very different visions of European integration. In general, however, the relationship has traditionally been characterised by [a shared pragmatism, common economic goals and open communication](#). As [Larres](#) notes, Germany has been an important ally for the UK since it joined the EEC in 1973, and the UK has been a key trade partner for Germany.

How UK government ministers involved in Brexit are viewed in Germany should thus be a matter of importance for a country facing its greatest diplomatic challenge in recent history. Germany will be an [important partner](#) in forthcoming Brexit talks, and so the UK needs Germany to take its demands and concerns – and by extension, its negotiators – seriously. Brexit proponents have repeatedly reiterated their view that Germany will ultimately acquiesce to their demands to protect their export market. Johnson recently argued that it was 'overwhelmingly in their interest' for EU countries to agree to favourable free trade terms, particularly as we '[buy more German cars than anybody else](#)'.



There is some truth to this. [Gunnar Beck](#), for example, argues that Germany is more economically dependent on Britain than is often claimed. It, therefore, has an economic interest in conceding to some British demands. But Germany's economic interest lies in the health of the European Union more broadly – as Markus Kerber, head of the Federation of German Industry (BDI) has [noted](#), Germany trades more with the EU27 than the UK alone. What's more, when it comes to the European Union, Germany has never been motivated purely by economic rationality, but also by its historical commitment to European integration.

[Charles Grant](#) argues that EU leaders will be driven by a fear of populism in their dealings with the UK. Indeed, German politicians and media view the rise of populism as one of the biggest threats to European integration. However, their concerns about populism relate not just to worries about contagion to other member states such as France should the UK get a beneficial deal. They also view Brexit supporters themselves as populists with little credibility. Taking the example of just one newspaper's coverage of the referendum campaign, conservative-leaning *Die Welt*, we get an ambivalent image of the UK, but a strikingly negative portrayal of one of Brexit's leading proponents, Boris Johnson.

On the one hand, Britain is held in high regard. The British are viewed as pragmatic, liberal, outward-looking. Journalists saw many areas of common ground, such a shared desire to make the EU more efficient and democratic. As I have argued [elsewhere](#), the idea of a 'Northern European community' of economically liberal, fiscally responsible countries emerged in German discourse on the Euro crisis, juxtaposed against what are perceived as struggling southern European economies. Britain is also included in this concept of northern Europe, an important partner for Germany in economic matters.

On the other hand, many news articles focus on what are seen as the outright lies of the Leave campaign, with Johnson described as someone who '[shamelessly uttered and repeated untruths](#)'. They paint a picture of someone motivated primarily by personal goals, not least by his childhood desire to be '[King of the World](#)', willing to say or do anything if it serves his interests or puts him in the spotlight. In particular, his claims about the £350m cost of EU membership are frequently mentioned, as well as his comparison between the [EU and Hitler](#), and his [racist accusations](#) directed at Barack Obama. Finally, following the referendum, he and Cameron are seen as having [abdicated their responsibility](#) for the referendum result, willing to disappear and leave others to clear up the mess.

It is, however, the perceived political consequences of his actions that are of greater concern. Johnson and Cameron were seen to have allowed their personal feud to damage the European project. Johnson's actions are seen as likely to destabilise the [European economy](#), or even threaten the very future of the European Union. Not only this, but he is put into the same category as [US presidential hopeful Donald Trump](#) and other right-wing populists who are seen as posing a more general [threat to Western liberal democracy](#). With their readiness to distort the truth, appeal to far-right sentiments and betray voters for their own interests, there is little sympathy in the German press for Brexit campaigners such as Johnson. Historical perceptions of the Brits [as a pragmatic and sensible people](#) in Germany are being fundamentally challenged.

While there are many areas of common concern when it comes to the EU, Germany has a broader interest in the future success of European integration. The manner in which the UK government has sought to bring about the changes it wants was seen as damaging to the EU, and leading Brexit supporters such as Johnson are looked upon with a similar unease that many also look upon Donald Trump. With a general election looming in 2017, German politicians must also consider their own domestic popularity. They might be reluctant to be seen conceding to the demands of populists who risk not just the future of the EU but European democracy more broadly.

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*Note: This article originally appeared at [LSE Brexit](#) and it gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [CC0 Public domain](#).*

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