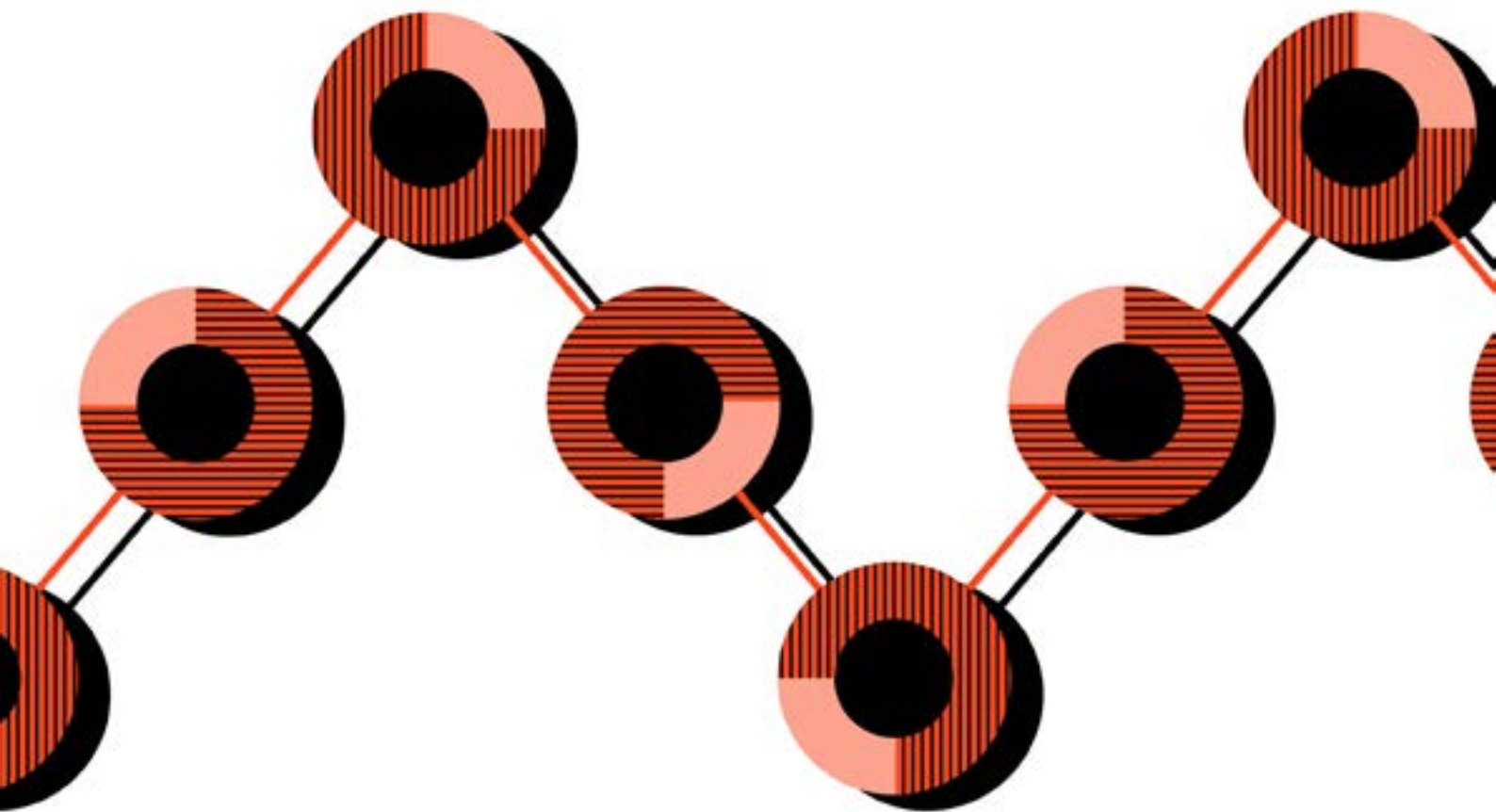


UK IN A  
CHANGING  
EUROPE

UK-EU RELATIONS  
TRACKER  
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# INTRODUCTION

This edition of the UK in a Changing Europe UK-EU Relations Tracker covers developments from October to December 2023, and looks forward to 2024.

Since the agreement on the Windsor Framework, the focus in UK-EU relations has been on making progress with the implementation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). This trend continued in the last quarter of the year, with the UK's association to Horizon and Copernicus and the first UK-EU Financial Regulatory Forum and UK-EU Cyber Dialogue taking place in London and Brussels. In addition, the Partnership Council, agreed to extend existing rules of origin for electric vehicles for three years.

Whilst these steps have been broadly welcomed, the process of agreeing the terms of cooperation has been lengthy. It took more than six months to reach political agreement on Horizon, and another three until it was formally adopted. The two sides agreed to set-up a cyber dialogue in March but did not hold the inaugural meeting until December. The wheels of TCA implementation seem to grind slowly, and with elections on both sides of the Channel, we can expect things to slow further this year.

Beyond the TCA, negotiations are ongoing on the UK's participation in an EU-led defence project to facilitate the movement of soldiers and equipment across borders. The UK was formally invited to join in November 2022, but agreement has been held up by disagreements with Spain. In May 2023, the UK and EU announced their intention to negotiate an agreement between UK agencies and Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Whilst discussions can continue at technical level, the upcoming elections and lack of political focus could cause further delays.

Bilaterally, the UK signed general agreements with Austria, Bulgaria, and Sweden. It now has framework agreements with 23 of the 27 member states. It also signed several issue-specific agreements with a focus on defence and migration, and introduced travel easements for French school groups. At a political level, this quarter was marked by a blossoming relationship between Rishi Sunak and the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, a diplomatic spat between Sunak and the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and heightened tensions in the UK-Ireland relationship over the UK's Troubles Legacy Act.

## WITHDRAWAL AGREEMENT

The **Withdrawal Agreement (WA)** establishes the terms of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, including the status of EU and UK citizens, the financial aspects of the UK's exit, and arrangements for Northern Ireland (NI) under the Protocol and Windsor Framework. It is underpinned by a comprehensive governance structure to facilitate its implementation.

### FINANCIAL PROVISIONS

The Specialised Committee on financial provisions met on 26 October to take stock of the UK's outstanding financial commitments under the WA. So far, the European Commission has issued six invoices to the UK. The committee noted 'the ongoing good cooperation in this field'. Whilst a large share of the **UK's financial obligations** were settled early on, the UK is expected to make payments (in particular for pension liabilities) through to the 2060s.

### NORTHERN IRELAND

The implementation of the Windsor Framework is underway and will continue through to 2025. The EU Ambassador to the UK, Pedro Serrano, **praised** the 'impressive amount of work' that has gone into introducing the new system for agri-foods from 1 October 2023. With new **milestones** coming up in the areas of customs, movements of parcels, and medicines, he emphasised that the 'full, timely and faithful implementation of these agreements' remained crucial to a functioning partnership. He also underlined that 'the framework cannot and will not be renegotiated'.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) continues to block a functioning Executive over **concerns** about the framework's impact on NI's position in the United Kingdom. Whilst **research** shows that a majority of people in NI are accepting or supportive of the new arrangements and see it as a 'good thing for Northern Ireland' overall, talks between the government and the DUP reached an **impasse** in December. The party rejected a £3.3 billion offer for NI, conditional on the restoration of devolved government.

Following almost two years of deadlock, the statutory deadline for forming a functioning Executive expired on 18 January 2024. Rather than calling an Assembly election, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland **has said** he will bring forward legislation to extend the period (as was the case last **February** when he extended it by a year).

With or without another election, members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (MLAs) will come under the spotlight this year. The **Protocol** requires the UK government to provide them with 'the opportunity for democratic consent' on the Protocol's core elements (Art. 5-10) by the end of the year. The consent vote was included to ensure democratic legitimacy for the continued application

of EU rules in NI.

Even without an Executive in place at the end of 2024, the consent vote can still take place. Any member of the Assembly can table a consent motion, requiring the presiding officer to recall the Assembly. The Assembly in its current composition is likely to return a simple majority (50% +1 of MLAs present) for the Protocol. In this case, the next consent vote would be in 2028.

The possibility of a Stormont election, the continued rollout of the Windsor Framework, and the requirement for a consent vote mean NI will remain a focal point of UK-EU relations this year.

## CITIZENS' RIGHTS

The 13<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Specialised Committee on Citizens' Rights took place on 4 December 2023. The Committee **agreed** to focus on 'the most serious implementation concerns' which have not been resolved at technical level. UK representatives raised concerns about the equal treatment of UK nationals wanting to purchase property in some EU member states, the availability of consistent data on the operation of some residency schemes, and the lack of available guidance on family reunification.

The EU expressed concerns about the UK's current plans to implement the 2022 High Court judgment. This found it was unlawful for pre-settled status holders to lose their rights if they fail to upgrade to settled status after five years. In response, the Home Office confirmed that pre-settled status holders will benefit from an automatic two-year extension of their status. This has been **criticized** as not going far enough by the UK's Independent Monitoring Authority for the Citizens' Rights Agreements (IMA). The IMA says an extension does not remove the time-limited nature of the status and therefore 'continues to be incompatible with the Agreements'.

Despite these problems, the EU Ambassador to the UK **emphasised** that cooperation on citizens' rights has been 'smooth' overall.

In December, reporting by the Guardian drew attention to several cases where EU citizens - who had been unaware of the need to apply for settled status - **faced** removal from the UK or **had** their bank accounts frozen. As of August 2023, the Home Office no longer accepts lack of awareness as a justification for late applications.

## OPERATION OF THE TCA'S INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

UK officials regularly engage with their EU counterparts through the TCA's formal structures. The Partnership Council, as the main oversight body, is supported by a range of topic-specific committees. Both sides also meet in the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, composed of 70 members from the European Parliament and the UK Parliament (21 MPs and 14 Peers).

## PARLIAMENTARY PARTNERSHIP ASSEMBLY

The Assembly held its fourth meeting on 4-5 December in Brussels. On the agenda were the state of play within the Partnership Council, youth mobility, artificial intelligence, and climate change, including the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.

The Assembly can request information and make recommendations to the Partnership Council. This time it called for a dialogue between the EU and the UK on youth mobility (see below).

## CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

The TCA establishes a Civil Society Forum which is **open** to participation from non-governmental organisations, business and employers' organisations, and academia.

The Forum **held** its second meeting on 7 November in London. EU and UK civil society representatives discussed trade in goods and services, regulatory cooperation and level playing field, and energy and climate change.

## PARTNERSHIP COUNCIL AND (TRADE) SPECIALISED COMMITTEES

In the three years since the TCA's entry into force, the Partnership Council has met twice. The next meeting will be co-chaired by Foreign Secretary, David Cameron. He **met** with Maroš Šefčovič, the chair representing the EU, during his first visit to Brussels in November.

The various specialised and trade specialised committees have conducted 59 meetings, with most meeting once per year.

**Table 1: Overview of meetings under the TCA's governance structure, 2021-2023**

TCA body	Meetings in 2021	Meetings in 2022	Meetings in 2023	Total number of meetings
Partnership Council	9 June	/	23 March	2
<b>Specialised Committees</b>				
Social Security Coordination	6 July	30 June	28 June	3
Energy	14 July	30 March; 28 September	9 November	4
Fisheries	20 July; 27 October	27 April; 20 July; 21 October	27 June; 22 September	7
Law Enforcement and Judicial Cooperation	19 October	13 October	19 June	3
Air Transport	14 October	28 June	1 June	3

Aviation Safety	23 November	14 November	30 November	3
Road Transport	24 November	21 November	23 November	3
Participation in Union Programmes	21 December	22 September	4 December	3
<b>Trade Partnership Committee</b>	16 November	1 December	7 December	3
<b>Trade Specialised Committees</b>				
Goods	8 October	5 October	8 November	3
Customs Co-operation and Rules of Origin	7 October	17 October	27 September	3
Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures	22-23 September	19 October	11 October	3
Technical Barriers to Trade	15 October	24 October	18 October	3
Services, Investment, and Trade	11 October	20 October	9 October	3
Intellectual Property	13 October	10 October	23 October	3
Public Procurement	12 October	27 October	16 November	3
Regulatory Co-operation	13 October	26 October	6 November	3
Level Playing Field	12 October	12 October	4 October	3
Administrative Cooperation in VAT and Recovery of Taxes and Duties	15 December	6 October	19 October	3

Addressing the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, Minister for Europe Leo Docherty pointed out that ‘our TCA committees... are working with increasing efficiency, with more than 55 meetings since 2021’. At the same meeting, EU Ambassador Pedro Serrano emphasised that a dozen legally binding decisions have been taken by TCA bodies this year, on issues ranging from fisheries to social security cooperation to value added tax. Whilst both expressed satisfaction with the way the committees are working, others in the Assembly **questioned** whether we ‘are we using the mechanisms that we have enough’, and whether work needed to be intensified in the period ahead of the **TCA review** in 2026.

EU-UK committees meet at a similar rate to those created under the **EU-Canada** Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA). Most CETA specialised committees meet once a year

and the CETA Joint Committee met three times in five years. However, unlike the TCA, the EU - Canada trade agreement is complemented by a **Strategic Partnership Agreement**, which allows for regular dialogue at the highest political level (via leaders' summits and a Joint Ministerial Committee, co-chaired by Canada's Foreign Minister and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy). These meetings provide opportunities to intensify cooperation or launch **new initiatives**, such as the EU-Canada Health Dialogue or the Strategic Partnership on Raw Materials.

There are no equivalent provisions in the TCA, and whilst Lord Frost **said** these were not needed as summits would 'happen naturally and organically', none have taken place so far. The Labour Party **has been clear** that it would like regular meetings at ministerial level if it comes to power.

A higher frequency of UK-EU meetings and more political involvement, as **recommended** by the House of Lords' European Affairs Committee, could accelerate cooperation in areas that are new and/or difficult. As pointed out by Lord Liddle during the Assembly, there seems to be 'a gap between good will and rapid action', with progress being slow even in areas where there is a strong mutual interest in cooperation.

However, with both sides holding elections, cooperation under the TCA is unlikely to intensify this year. The European Parliament holds its last plenary session in April, followed by European elections from 6-9 June, and a potentially prolonged reshuffle of EU top jobs. This includes the election of the President of the European Commission and his or her college of Commissioners, i.e., the institution that manages UK-EU relations and co-chairs the Partnership Council. In 2019, the year of the last European Parliament election, the process of electing a **new Commission** took five months.

With the UK also holding an election this year, the window for meaningful progress in implementing the TCA, or for progressing negotiations outside of it, is therefore small.

The UK government is expected to host the next summit of the **European Political Community** (EPC), an informal forum of European leaders, in 2024. This could be a rare opportunity to inject political momentum into some areas of cooperation. In the margins of previous summits, the UK government has been able to **reach agreement** in principle on a political summit with France, and to **discuss** the restart of co-operation with the grouping of the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC). At the summit in October 2023, it spearheaded a **push for** informal talks on migration, resulting in a pledge to combat people smuggling.

Whilst a useful setting for the UK Prime Minister to mingle with European leaders, others **appeared** less enthusiastic following the last summit in Granada and no date has been set for the next one. Pressed on a date by parliamentarians, the UK government has **said** 'it continues to consult partners about the UK EPC summit and will make an announcement in due course'.

# ONGOING TCA IMPLEMENTATION

## EU PROGRAMMES

As of 1 January 2024, the UK's associate membership to the EU's Horizon research and innovation programme came into **force**.

The UK has also rejoined the EU's Earth observation programme, Copernicus. This follows an agreement in principle between the EU and the UK on 7 September 2023, approval by the Council of the EU on 15 November, and finally the formal adoption of the decision by the TCA's Specialised Committee on Participation in Union Programmes on 4 December.

The UK's return to Horizon was welcomed by the UK and EU's scientific communities. Following several years of uncertainty, the focus in the UK is now on maximising participation in the programmes. The Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT) has **announced** a communications campaign and engagement events for 2024 to boost participation. The government has also partnered with UK scientific organisations to offer 'pump priming' funding of up to £10,000 to support UK-based organisations with their applications.

## RULES OF ORIGIN

After months of debate, the Partnership Council on 21 December published its **decision** to extend existing rules of origin for electric vehicles for three years. Whilst it disapplies the anticipated increase in local content requirements from 1 January 2024, full rules will apply as of 2027. The decision states that no further delays 'should be considered' and higher local content requirements from 2027 will be locked in for at least four years.

The Commission's proposal to member states **cites** external circumstances not foreseen in 2020, such as the impact of Covid-19 on global supply chains and the war in Ukraine and recognises the concerns raised by European industries about their readiness to comply with stricter requirements. It also reaffirms the political commitment to fostering a European battery industry.

Additionally, the **UK** and the **EU** both announced measures to support their domestic battery markets.

## ENERGY

The Specialised Committee on Energy held its fourth meeting on 23 November 2023 to discuss electricity trading arrangements and security of supply coordination. Following Brexit, the electricity market in Great Britain is no longer coupled to the EU. The TCA commits the EU and UK to develop new arrangements for electricity trading. These were expected to be in place by April 2022, but are yet to be finalised.

In December, members of the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly expressed disappointment about the slow implementation of electricity trading provisions.

## SECURITY

The EU and UK held their first **Cyber Dialogue** on 14 December. The establishment of a regular dialogue is foreseen by the TCA (Article 703) and was **agreed** at the Partnership Council in March 2023. At the same meeting, the EU and UK also agreed to set up a regular dialogue on counterterrorism, as provided for in Article 768 (3). The inaugural meeting is due to take place on 2 February 2024.

The TCA encourages a handful of regular security dialogues, for example on small arms or proliferation of weapons of mass destructions. Their set-up has not yet been agreed by the Partnership Council, indicating a gradual approach to implementation.

## FINANCIAL SERVICES

The UK-EU Financial Regulatory Forum **held** its first meeting on 19 October in Brussels. The forum provides a platform to exchange information and facilitate regulatory cooperation under a **Memorandum of Understanding** (MoU). Whilst the draft MoU was concluded in March 2021, it was only adopted in June 2023 due to tensions in the wider relationship.

## SANITARY AND PHYTOSANITARY MEASURES

The Trade Specialised Committee on sanitary and phytosanitary measures **held** its third meeting on 11 October. The UK notified the EU that ‘there are currently no active plans to further review’ retained EU law in this area. These are EU laws that were cut and pasted onto the UK statute book at the end of the transition period.

Whilst the government ‘will continue to build on the opportunities to develop bespoke legislation that is tailored to the UK’ it does not intend to diverge from EU rules on a large scale. This reflects the more cautious approach to divergence taken under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, with the latest UKICE **tracker** finding very few cases where the UK has made use of its post-Brexit regulatory freedoms.

The Specialised Committee also discussed the **UK’s Border Target Operating Model (BTOM)** which was published on 29 August 2023. Whilst UK exporters have had to deal with full EU border checks since 1 January 2021, the UK government repeatedly **delayed** the introduction of checks at the UK border.

It is now planning to introduce health certificates on animal and plant products coming from the EU from 31 January 2024, followed by physical checks from 30 April, and safety declarations from 31 October 2024. EU officials expressed their hopes that this was ‘final’ and noted their concern about previous postponements with just a few weeks’ notice.

# UK-EU COOPERATION BEYOND THE TCA

## FOREIGN AND SECURITY COOPERATION

In July 2023 the House of Lords' European Affairs Committee launched an inquiry into the implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for UK-EU relations. **Statements** made by officials and politicians from both sides show that the urgency of the situation acted as a catalyst for significant UK-EU cooperation on sanctions, intelligence exchanges, and the training of Ukrainian forces.

As the TCA contains no foreign, security, and defence chapter, cooperation has been largely informal and ad hoc. The government has made clear that it **sees** informality as an advantage, not a disadvantage. This is due to the agility it offers and because ministers fear that formalised arrangements might put in 'restrictions'.

This could change if Labour comes to power at the next general election. The party is **advocating** 'systematic cooperation and a defence and security pact'. It also wants to strengthen the UK's bilateral ties with Germany and France through a security treaty with the former and a 'reboot' of the 2010 Lancaster House Treaty with the latter. Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey also signalled his openness to UK participation in EU-led peacekeeping missions.

As EU Ambassador Pedro Serrano **pointed out** during his evidence session, 'there are no objections to having this [structured cooperation], but I think there would have to be a request [from the UK], which would need to be considered'.

## DEFENCE COOPERATION

The UK's participation in an EU-led defence capability project on military mobility continues to be held up by disagreements with Spain over Gibraltar. The project under the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) umbrella enables the swift movement of military personnel and equipment across borders.

Even though the Council of the EU decided to formally invite the UK in November 2022, Minister Docherty **confirmed** in December 2023 that negotiations were still ongoing, and that the UK remained 'open to a resolution'.

## YOUTH MOBILITY AND TOURING ARTISTS

The Parliamentary Partnership Assembly (PPA) at its December meeting **called** for an EU-UK dialogue on youth mobility. The recommendation notes that the UK government's current approach of pursuing bilateral deals with some, but not all, member states 'creates differences' between EU citizens.

Whilst the EU institutions are advocating a pan-European deal, the UK government has shown little appetite for this. Speaking to the Assembly, the Minister for Trade, Greg Hands,

confirmed that the UK government is looking to explore ‘further bilateral opportunities...with our international partners, and naturally this includes our European partners as well’.

The Parliamentary Partnership Assembly also encouraged the Partnership Council to identify more opportunities for student exchanges between the EU and the UK and noted that the EU remains open to wider association in the Erasmus+ programme. Post-Brexit, the UK government created the Turing scheme to enable British students to study abroad, but unlike the Erasmus programme it is not reciprocal.

As part of their **recommendation**, parliamentarians proposed ‘potentially’ using the review of the TCA to develop a comprehensive approach to allow artists to tour freely in the EU and the UK. Since Brexit, artists face multiple obstacles ranging from work permits to tax and merchandise and getting their equipment into the EU. Whilst these issues have been raised by the UK on several occasions, the EU says these are a function of the thin agreement chosen by the UK government.

# BILATERAL RELATIONS

## UK BILATERALS WITH EU MEMBER STATES

The UK government has continued to establish strategic bilateral dialogues with EU member states post-Brexit: it signed statements with Austria, Bulgaria and Sweden in the past quarter. As with previous declarations (see table 2), these are non-binding and do not lead to any obligations under international or domestic law. They are largely aspirational and cover a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from foreign policy to cooperation on economic matters, criminal justice, energy, climate and environmental policy, as well as people-to-people links, including research and mobility. In all cases, the UK Foreign Office and their European counterpart have responsibility for the strategic bilateral dialogue.

The UK has signed general non-binding declarations establishing bilateral dialogues with all EU states save Hungary, Finland, Spain and Ireland. With the exception of the [agreement](#) with Poland, which was signed by Theresa May in late 2016, all others were signed after the end of the transition period. For the remaining four, the UK has strong relations with Finland, especially in defence cooperation and over Ukraine. Bilateral relations with Ireland have improved since the Windsor Framework Agreement, but tensions are brewing over the UK's Troubles legacy act (see below). Cooperation with Spain on specific issues, mainly related to easing people-to-people links, is good, but the parties have not yet reached a deal on Gibraltar, with negotiations still ongoing (see below). As regards Hungary, the UK government appears less keen to cultivate a strong political relationship. Despite PM Viktor Orbán's [desire](#) for a close relationship, Rishi Sunak does not seem to be as enthusiastic as Boris Johnson. The latter entertained Viktor Orbán twice in Downing Street, in [May 2021](#) and in [March 2022](#), at a time when bilateral relations with other EU heads of states and governments were at a low ebb.

**Table 2: Overview of the UK's general bilateral statements/declarations with EU member states**

EU member state	Bilateral statement/declaration	Date
Austria	<a href="#">Joint Vision Statement on Strategic Dialogue</a>	20 November 2023 (Cameron)
Belgium	<a href="#">Joint Declaration on Bilateral Cooperation</a>	30 November 2021 (Johnson)
Bulgaria	<a href="#">Joint declaration on Strategic Dialogue</a>	24 October (Cameron)
Croatia	<a href="#">Joint Declaration on Bilateral Cooperation</a>	28 April 2023 (Cleverly)
Cyprus	<a href="#">Memorandum of understanding establishing a strategic cooperation</a>	15 November 2022 (Cleverly)
Czech Republic	<a href="#">Joint Statement of Intent</a>	27 May 2022 (Truss)
Denmark	<a href="#">Joint Statement</a>	20 June 2022 (Johnson)

Estonia	<a href="#">Joint leaders statement</a>	6 June 2022 (Johnson)
Estonia	<a href="#">Statement of intent for enhancing cooperation between Estonia and the United Kingdom</a>	11 March 2021 (Raab)
France	<a href="#">Joint Leaders Declaration</a>	10 March 2023 (Sunak)
Germany	<a href="#">UK-Germany joint declaration</a>	30 June 2021 (Raab)
Greece	<a href="#">Memorandum of understanding on strategic bilateral framework</a>	24 November 2021 (Truss)
Italy	<a href="#">Memorandum of Understanding on Bilateral Cooperation</a>	27 April 2023 (Sunak)
Latvia	<a href="#">Joint Declaration of cooperation</a>	6 December 2021 (Truss)
Lithuania	<a href="#">Joint declaration on bilateral cooperation</a>	30 May 2022 (Truss)
Luxembourg	<a href="#">Joint statement on bilateral cooperation</a>	12 May 2023 (Cleverly)
Malta	<a href="#">Bilateral cooperation framework</a>	10 February 2023 (Cleverly)
Netherlands	<a href="#">Joint statement on foreign, development and security bilateral cooperation</a>	16 November 2022 (Cleverly)
Poland	<a href="#">Joint statement establishing the intergovernmental consultations</a>	2 December 2016 (May)
Portugal	<a href="#">Joint Declaration on Bilateral Cooperation</a>	15 June 2022 (Johnson)
Romania	<a href="#">Joint Statement</a>	23 March 2023 (Cleverly)
Slovakia	<a href="#">Joint Declaration</a>	21 February 2023 (Cleverly)
Slovenia	<a href="#">Statement of Intent</a>	23 February 2022 (Truss)
Sweden	<a href="#">Joint Declaration on Strategic partnership</a>	13 October 2023 (Sunak)
Sweden	<a href="#">Joint Leaders Statement</a>	16 June 2023 (Sunak)

In the last quarter, the UK also signed agreements in areas of strategic interest with specific member states. These include agreements to cooperate on migration, defence and security (see below), a non-binding **agreement** on green shipping corridors with Belgium, a binding **treaty** on mutual recognition of driving licences with Portugal, and a non-binding trilateral **Memorandum of Cooperation on e-governance** with Ukraine and Estonia. Non-binding agreements, such as Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), do not create obligations under international or domestic law, nor do they require parliamentary scrutiny contrary to formal treaties.

# POLICY AREAS

## DEFENCE, SECURITY AND FOREIGN POLICY

In the last quarter, the UK has signed a number of agreements and joint statements on security and defence matters. They build on previous agreements and are further evidence that the UK is a major strategic partner for EU member states.

The UK signed an [air defence deal](#) worth £4 billion with Poland in November and an [international treaty](#) with Japan and Italy for a future combat air programme in December. On defence and security, the UK government has made it a priority to pursue bilateral relations and through NATO first and foremost, including on defence equipment, rather than seek structured cooperation with the EU. Both [David Cameron](#) and [Leo Docherty](#) repeatedly underlined the UK's preference for bilateral agreements over a closer and structured relationship with the EU in their interventions in the House of Lords European Affairs Committee in December 2023.

Bilateral cooperation has been reinforced since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in particular with the Baltic and Nordic states, including multilaterally through the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which also includes the Netherlands. Rishi Sunak met his counterparts at a summit on 13 October in Sweden and the JEF defence ministers [agreed](#) to deploy maritime and air capabilities for the protection of critical undersea infrastructure at a meeting in November 2023. The UK also cooperates with Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Lithuania, and Iceland over the [International Fund for Ukraine](#) (IFU). The Fund is administered by the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) on behalf of all members. In October, the ministers of defence of the contributors to the IFU [agreed](#) Maintenance and Manoeuvre Support packages for Ukraine's counter-offensive.

In the last quarter, the [Franco-British Council Defence Conference](#) took place in November. It was attended by the UK Secretary of Defence, Grant Shapps, and his French counterpart, Sebastien Lecornu. France and the UK have a formal defence and security cooperation agreement established by the Lancaster House Treaties in 2010.

On foreign policy, David Cameron has engaged with important partners in the EU. He met his French counterpart, Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, and French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris in December 2023. The Foreign Office [press release](#) stated that 'The visit to Paris will also look ahead to a milestone year for UK-France relations in 2024, which will mark 120 years since the signing of the Entente Cordiale and 80 years since the D-Day landings, 2 watershed moments for the 2 countries.' He also travelled to Italy in December to meet PM Georgia Meloni and the Foreign Minister, Antonio Tajani.

Cameron and his German counterpart, Annalena Baerbock, [co-published](#) an article in The Sunday Times on 17 December calling for a 'sustainable ceasefire' in Gaza. The two countries had both abstained on the [vote](#) on 'an immediate humanitarian ceasefire' in the UN General Assembly on the 12 December whilst 17 European member states, including France, voted in favour.

## YOUTH MOBILITY

On 7 December, the UK **announced** that it had relaxed the travel document requirements for school groups visiting the UK from France. For trips from schools in France, EU, other EEA and Swiss national children will be able to travel on their national identity card. Other nationals travelling as part of a school trip from France will no longer be required to obtain a visa but still require a passport. Facilitating school trips was a pledge in the joint declaration adopted by Macron and Sunak at the France-UK summit in March 2023 and required unilateral changes to UK rules.

The reaction has been positive, notably from **representatives** of the UK tourist sector, as school trips had plummeted since Brexit. In the wake of the announcement, the German ambassador to the UK **called** for extending the new rules to all European school trips, underlining that there has also been a 75% drop in trips from Germany. David Cameron has **indicated** that he favours ‘keeping with bilateral discussions’ for school trips, steering clear of an EU-wide agreement.

## MIGRATION

The UK signed a **joint statement with Austria** on closer cooperation on tackling illegal migration and terrorism in October, and a **joint statement with Bulgaria** on enhancing cooperation in combatting and preventing organised immigration crime in November. Both are non-binding and lay down statements of intention to cooperate. The UK signed a **new agreement** with Italy to jointly contribute £4 million to the International Organization for Migration’s assisted voluntary returns project in Tunisia.

Cooperation with Italy is driven by what appears to be a close personal relationship between Sunak and Italian PM Giorgia Meloni, cemented by their shared interest in limiting migration. On 6 October, Meloni and Sunak published a **joint article** on the fight against human trafficking in The Times and the Corriere della Sera newspapers. The day before, they co-chaired a meeting on migration at the third European Political Community summit in Granada. The meeting was attended by the Dutch PM, the French President, the Albanian PM and the President of the European Commission and led to a **joint statement** on ‘a shared commitment to support one another to tackle the challenges of irregular migration’.

On 16 December, Rishi Sunak held a **trilateral meeting** in Rome with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama to discuss existing agreements between the countries on tackling irregular migration. Italy recently reached a deal to send some seaborne migrants to Albania - the deal is currently on hold with the Albanian high court reviewing its legality. Sunak also held a **bilateral meeting** with the Italian PM and spoke at a public rally organised by Meloni’s national-conservative populist party, Brothers of Italy, in Rome on 16 December. Sunak underlined that he and Meloni have ‘shared interests and shared values’ rooted in conservatism in a **speech** in which he attributed ‘illegal migration’ solely to the work of criminal organisations and reiterated his pledge to end irregular migration.

# NOTABLE DEVELOPMENTS FOR SPECIFIC BILATERAL RELATIONS

## IRELAND

A **meeting** of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) took place in Dublin on 28 November 2023. The conference was set up by the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement ‘to promote bilateral cooperation at all levels on all matters of mutual interest’ between both governments.

Discussions focused on political stability in Northern Ireland and the urgent need to have a functioning Executive, as well security cooperation and citizenship issues. The Northern Ireland executive is still not restored because the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is **seeking** guarantees on the region’s place in the UK internal market and wants an end to the provisions for what Party Leader Jeffrey Donaldson **deems** ‘unnecessary customs checks, delays and costs’.

Discussions at the BIIGC also focussed on broader UK-Ireland relations, notably collaboration for Horizon grants and getting funder-to-funder discussions going.

The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA) held its 65th plenary in October 2023. Whilst the Irish Minister for Finance, Michael McGrath, and the UK Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office, Steve Baker, **both underlined** the improvement in the bilateral relations, the latter’s **comments** on the need to have a ‘supermajority’ for any border poll – a threshold of 60% in favour – were **met with concern** by Irish politicians across the political spectrum.

BIPA has also **published** a report on the Common Travel Area (CTA) and the impact of the introduction of the UK Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA). The **ETA** is an electronic scheme for visitors who do not need a visa for short stays to the UK, or who do not already have a UK immigration status prior to travelling. Whilst legal residents in Ireland, including EU, EEA and Swiss nationals will not require a UK ETA, it ‘could provide a barrier to entry for Northern Ireland’s 1 million tourists coming from abroad each year, 70% of whom arrive in Ireland first’. The report underlines that ‘the challenges of introducing an ETA scheme are indicative of a need for a greater understanding of the potential impact on Northern Ireland of legislation introduced in sovereign parliaments’.

Serious tensions have emerged over the UK’s Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act that received royal assent in September 2023. The so-called Troubles legacy act **includes** a limited form of immunity from prosecution for Troubles-related offences, and a halt to future civil cases and legacy inquests. On 20 December, the Irish government decided to initiate an inter-State case against the United Kingdom under the European Convention on Human Rights. In the government’s **statement**, the Tánaiste Micheál Martin, emphasised that he had repeatedly requested that the UK government pause its legislation, and regretted the UK’s decision to proceed with unilateral legislation ‘shutting off any possibility of political resolution’. His words echo his **statement** to the Houses of the Oireachtas end of November 2023, in which he emphasises that ‘there have been significant improvements in bilateral relations from the low point that was sadly

reached as a result of the political dynamics created by Brexit... but there is work yet to do to fully restore the trust, mutual understanding and the reflex for mutually beneficial co-operation that were defining factors in previous times.'

In response to the Irish government's decision to initiate an inter-State case, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Chris Heaton-Harris issued a **statement** in which he 'profoundly regrets' the decision and that the UK government 'will continue robustly to defend the legislation'. In early January 2024, the UK government **issued** a formal letter to the Irish government urging it to clarify 'its own record on tackling legacy issues in its own jurisdiction'.

The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act **does not have the support** of the five major political parties in Northern Ireland or of the Victims and survivors' groups.

## SPAIN

The discussion resumed on the negotiations for a formal agreement on Gibraltar post-Brexit. The EU is negotiating on behalf of Spain on the matter. The UK Foreign Office leads for the UK. Negotiations were interrupted in June 2023 because of the Spanish general election on 23 July; the new government was sworn in on the 16 November 2023 and is led by the Socialist Pedro Sanchez. David Cameron **met** his Spanish counterpart, José Manuel Albares, on the fringes of the foreign ministers NATO meeting on 28 November 2023 to discuss negotiations on Gibraltar. The 15th round of UK-EU negotiations took place in December 2023.

On 21 December 2023, the Spanish Minister for Foreign Affairs **stated** that negotiations were progressing at a 'very good pace'. The UK government **stated** in early January 2024 that it is 'working side-by-side with the Government of Gibraltar, [and] is committed to concluding a **UK-EU** treaty in respect of Gibraltar as soon as possible.' However, neither Spain nor the UK have committed to any timeline. Meanwhile, ad hoc checks by Spanish border control forces at the border crossing between Gibraltar and mainland Spain continue **to lead** to episodic delays.

## GREECE

Rishi Sunak's made a last-minute cancellation to a bilateral meeting in London with his Greek counterpart, PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Sunak took offense when Mitsotakis expressed his wish to see the Parthenon Marbles returned to Greece in an interview on British television ahead of the bilateral meeting. Mitsotakis expressed his '**dismay**' in a statement. Nevertheless, both the **Greek PM** and **Foreign Minister**, Georgios Gerapetritis, indicated immediately after the incident that diplomatic relations between the UK and Greece are unlikely to suffer any major set-back.

# CONCLUSION

In the latter half of 2023, the EU and UK made tangible progress in implementing the TCA. They concluded a deal on the UK's participation in Horizon and Copernicus, and the UK-EU Financial Forum and UK-EU Cyber Dialogue held their inaugural meetings. The two sides also avoided 10% tariffs for electric vehicles by agreeing to delay the introduction of stricter rules of origin.

However, implementing (and in the latter case amending) the TCA has been a slow process, including sensitive discussions over financial contributions and industrial strategy. Whilst the Windsor Framework lifted the mood immediately, it still took the better part of the year to come to an agreement on Horizon, and to set up one of two agreed security dialogues. A solution on rules of origin was agreed only weeks before stricter rules would have entered into force.

Whilst the EU and UK have confirmed their commitment to maximising the opportunities in the TCA, there has been little detail on priorities or timelines. Even where there is agreement on what to implement next, the specific terms of cooperation are often subject to further negotiations. As the last year has shown, agreeing these can take time.

This is likely to slow down further once the EU machinery enters election mode in early summer. With the last official European Council summit and European Parliament session scheduled for March and April respectively, the EU will want to close important legislative files before then. UK-EU relations are not going to feature on this list of pre-election priorities. With elections in the UK likely to take place shortly after the EU election, EU officials will take a wait-and-see approach until they know who is in charge in Westminster.

After a year of improved mood music and progress made in several areas of cooperation, the election campaigns might bring back sharper rhetoric (in the UK), and the work on implementing the TCA might slow down. When both sides are busy digesting their election results in the latter half of this year, the relationship might operate in a vacuum, with work at the technical level continuing, but limited political impetus.

The next EPC summit in the UK could offer a rare opportunity for informal discussions at the highest political level. However, whilst previous summits have provided useful settings for the UK, other EU leaders appear to be losing interest in the format. Whilst the UK government continues to consult with partners, no summit date has been announced yet.

In the bilateral area, the UK now has established general frameworks for cooperation with most EU member states. The real test will be the extent to which the government and its counterparts invest the time and resources needed to follow up on commitments. Whilst many stakeholders welcomed the UK's decision to ease travel requirements for French school groups, the UK's pursuit of bilateralism contrasts with the EU's preference for a pan-European solution on mobility. For the time being, a wide-ranging deal on youth mobility seems unlikely.

The UK's relationship with Ireland, which had improved following the Windsor Framework, has once again come under strain over the so-called Troubles legacy Act. With ongoing difficulties in restoring a functioning Executive in NI and a consent vote on the Protocol's key provisions at end of 2024, there is a need for strong UK-Ireland relations going forward.