

BREXIT: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

● For Poland the priority is to protect the rights of Poles living in the UK and at the same time woo businesses looking for a new European headquarters

BY LIANNE GUTCHER
Special to GN Focus

Brexit has ignited concerns within Poland about how the country can defend its interests in Europe and protect its workers' rights in Britain, while presenting an opportunity to lure businesses that no longer wish to be headquartered in the UK.

In the June referendum, 52 per cent of British voters chose to leave the EU. UK Prime Minister Theresa May has said she will start the formal Brexit negotiation process by triggering Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty by the end of March. The departure of Britain from the 28-state bloc will leave Poland without its most important political ally within the EU.

"The current Polish government is losing, politically speaking, a major partner," says Małgorzata Bonikowska, Brexit expert and President of the Centre for International Relations in Warsaw. "We also have a good economic tie-up with the UK – it's our third trade partner after Germany and the Czech Republic."

The UK is "in the first place" among EU partners, Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski told the Polish parliament in January, adding that the two nations had a "common perception of European problems".

Shared scepticism

Like the UK, Poland opted to remain outside the Eurozone and both countries shared scepticism about deeper European integration. Successive UK governments fought to ensure that non-Eurozone countries were not sidelined. This may now be harder for Poland to achieve without the UK.



● Poland's Palace of Culture and Science showed support for Remain during the referendum

Brexit also leaves the hundreds of thousands of Poles living and working in the UK unsure about their rights after the terms of the exit agreement are settled. After Poland became a member of the EU in May 2004, Poles flocked to Britain, seeking wages as much as four times higher than they would earn at home.

There are about 900,000 Poles in Britain, making them the largest group of residents born outside the UK. The National Bank of Poland estimates that Poles send home more than \$1 billion (Dh3.67 billion) annually. "The balance was positive for both sides," says Dr Bonikowska. "For Poland, the unemployment rate dropped. Certain families were receiving [a] certain [higher] income. And the

UK was also happy because a lot of jobs were done by Poles which the Brits did not want to do."

However, public opinion vis-a-vis immigrants, including Poles, has since shifted in the UK. Reports in the British media have documented the verbal abuse and racism migrants have faced in the aftermath of the vote.

So far, despite the uncertainty about their future rights and the increase in xenophobia, there has been no mass exodus of Poles from the UK. "There is still the sense that although it is tougher and more difficult and people don't like us very much, the living conditions are still better in the

are being respected," says Zaborowski.

"It will also probably be the position of the Polish government that they would object to the situation in which there is British membership in the single market without subscription to the free movement [of people] and freedom of labour."

New hopes

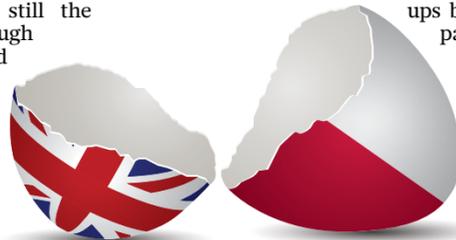
There are, however, opportunities arising for Poland out of Brexit. The country is positioning itself as a European hub to attract companies that no longer find the UK as attractive. And while, again, there has been no immediate rush to leave the UK, some companies are putting investment plans on hold as they await the outcome of talks.

Mike Ashmead, Managing Director of crash test dummy maker Encocam, told Reuters he is reconsidering plans to expand his facility near Cambridge in favour of in Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Germany or Poland.

Poland is also one of the nations queuing up to lure European agencies from London such as the European Medicines Agency and the European Banking Authority.

"The Polish government expects some companies to move from the UK to Poland – financial companies, service companies," says Dr Bonikowska. "If Brexit is a reality, Poland also wants to use it positively for ourselves, for our economy. We are trying to encourage tie-ups between Polish companies and British

and foreign companies that are in the UK, and the best would be for us to convince some of them to move to Poland as a European hub." ■



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