One of the most important factors affecting British politics is its membership in the European Communities, which has already had massive implications for this country. The relationship between Britain and Europe has always been problematic. In Britain there has been little enthusiasm for European integration *per se*, and equally little understanding of the enthusiasm felt on the continent. Europe has been seen as a menace rather than an opportunity and very few British politicians have attempted to argue (as is commonplace on the continent) that monetary union, for instance, is the only way of regaining control over financial policy.¹ The European idea of pursuing economic integration as a means to political union has also been met with blank incomprehension, if not outright hostility. Britain has always been attempting to slow down the process of integration and, consequently,

has often fallen behind and had no choice but to catch up.2 However, the portrayal of Britain as a “difficult partner” or “laggard leader” in European affairs is only partly justified. Based on its specific understanding of national sovereignty, Britain has developed a much more pragmatic and instrumental approach towards Europe than most of its partners on the continent.3 Nevertheless, the country was a strong driving force in favor of integration in many crucial policy fields like the single market or trade policy.4 According to Alan Milward, the process of European integration entails “pooling” the sovereignty in order to protect national interests and extend the national governments’ control of their own destinies.5 In Britain, contrary to the continent, national interests dictated a different line and it was only when exclusion from the Communities appeared to threaten them and then British government began to accept the need for membership. The very different motivation behind British joining ensured that the British aims inside the Communities would be limited or “defensive”.6 The most controversial aspect of Britain’s membership in the EC has always related to “erosion” of its sovereignty.

This interpretation has been supported by those studies of British policy which have so far appeared. Sean Greenwood has emphasized that the British governments before the 1960s were following their interests in staying out of the emergent Communities.7 According to John Young, Britain sought the development of European cooperation by means of “practical programmes” rather than “ambitious schemes”.8 Finally, Stephen George has argued that successive British governments, both before and after 1973, and both Conservative and Labour, have conducted a consistent policy attempt-

2 D. Childs, Britain since 1945, Routledge 1992, p. 20.
6 Ibidem.
ing to pursue regional cooperation on strictly intergovernmental lines, and attempting to prevent “regionalism” from disrupting “globalism” and “internationalism”.

II. FROM THE MARSHALL PLAN TO THE TREATIES OF ROME

The new Europe that emerged after the Second World War was driven by both politics and economics, but political considerations were the most important. Centuries of divisions and conflicts within Europe had convinced many of the need to end old antagonism and promote instead a new era of cooperation, peace and prosperity. The prime motive of the architects of the new Europe was to prevent war. While it was certainly hoped that closer European integration would help to rebuild agricultural and industrial production, a principal objective was to lock the economies of France and Germany so closely together as to render another war between them impossible.

Britain’s wartime experience was very different from that of the other European countries. After the fall of France, Britain and its empire “stood alone”. Its national institutions, sense of national identity emerged strengthened by the war. There was no crisis of the nation-state in Britain. Moreover, the globalization of the war served to emphasize the importance of Britain’s extra-European links. The empire and the Commonwealth were crucial to Britain’s survival. But it was only with the help of the Soviet Union and the United States that Britain was able to turn survival into victory. The fact that this country was the weakest of the “Big Three” merely underlined the importance of maintaining good relations with the emerging “superpowers”, British foreign policy was based on The Three Great Circles:

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11 Ibidem.
12 A. May, op.cit., p. 6.
the British Empire, the “English Speaking World”, and “United Europe”.13 The deterioration of the international situation, accompanied by a thaw in Anglo–French relations, led to a revival Britain's interest in western European integration in the years 1947–1948. However, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin emphasized: “we must remain, as we have always been in the past, different in character from other European nations and fundamentally incapable of wholehearted integration with them”.14

One of the major factors in kick–starting the European integration process was the Marshall Plan (1947). Its main aim was to provide American aid for European recovery plan. But the Americans emphasized that “The initiative had come from Europe”.15 It was largely Ernest Bevin's determination which ensured the creation of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (the OEEC), which coordinated the national recovery plans of sixteen western European states and presented them to the Washington as a single programme.16 It is worth mentioning that by the time the Plan came to an end (1951), America had donated $ 13 bln, of which $ 2,7 bln went to Britain.17

On 9 May 1950 the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman announced a proposal (The Schuman Plan) to “pool” French and German coal and steel production under a supranational body “High Authority”, as “the first concrete foundation of a European federation”.18 There were substantial reasons for British non–involvement in this initiative. In the first place, the European economies were still devastated by the war. In coal and steel, Britain was more or less self–sufficient and exported very little to Europe.

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16 It was replaced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (the OECD) in 1960.
On the other hand, Britain’s exports to its major markets (the Commonwealth) were likely to suffer if Britain associated more closely with Europe. Secondly, the Labour government had nationalized coal and was committed to the nationalization of steel, whereas the Schuman Plan appeared to involve the formation of an effective cartel, run in the interests of industrialists. Thirdly, the British government had long made clear its preference for intergovernmental rather than supranational forms of integration.\footnote{S.U. K. Younger, Britain and Europe 1950, “International Affairs”, 1967, 43/1, p. 36.}

Based on the Schuman Plan the Treaty of Paris was signed in April 1951. As a result of last-minute concessions to the Dutch, the European Coal and Steel Community (the ECSC) was established and it was much intergovernmental as supranational in character.\footnote{The countries that formed the ECSC (“the Six”) were the following: France, Germany, Italy, and the three Benelux states.} Again, for similar reasons, Britain did not take part in this initiative. An Anglo–ECSC Treaty of Association was eventually signed in 1954, but this provided only for a Council of association, exchanges of information and joint action on pricing and supplies.\footnote{L. Christopher, Absent At the Creation: Britain and the Formation of the European Community 1950–52, Dartmouth, Aldershot 1996, p. 141.} Pressure from the coal and steel industries, trade unions, the Treasury and the Board of trade ensured that the proposal to move towards a common market in coal and steel was dropped.

On 25 March 1957 the leaders of “the Six” signed the two Treaties of Rome, establishing the European Economic Community (the EEC) and Euratom. The two new Communities came into existence on 1 January 1958. Undoubtedly, The EEC Treaty was by far the more significant of the two, envisaging the abolition of internal customs duties, the erection of a common external tariff, free movement of capital and labour, the progressive integration of policies in areas such as agriculture, transport, trade and competition and the gradual realization of an “ever closer union” among the member states. The first round of tariff adjustments was scheduled for 1 January 1959.\footnote{D. Desmond, Ever Closer Union? An Introduction to the European Community, Macmillan, London 1994, p. 45.}

The emergence of a potentially powerful economic bloc at the heart of Western Europe filled a number of British ministers with dismay. David
Eccles declared that twice within living memory Britain had gone to war to oppose the formation of “a hostile bloc across the Channel”. The British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan came up with a proposal (the so-called “Plan G”) for an industrial free trade area linking “the Six” with the other eleven OEEC members. The plan deliberately excluded agriculture and allowed member states to set their own tariffs against non-members (unlike the EEC). H. Macmillan insisted that the latter was fundamental: Britain could never agree “to our entering arrangements which, as a matter of principle, would prevent our treating the great range of imports from the Commonwealth at least as favourably as those from the European countries”.

Understandably, the Europeans were unenthused. The French, in particular, suspected another attempt to undermine the common market negotiations. It soon became clear that “the Six” were uninterested in any proposal which excluded agriculture and external tariffs, and also that they wanted access to Commonwealth markets on equal terms with Britain.

The prospect of a trade war was a powerful inducement to Britain to join with Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland in negotiating the European Free Trade Association (the EFTA), as an alternative to the EEC. However, most historians have seen it as no more than a side–show or Cul–de–Sac on the route to British membership of the EEC. It was conceived as expedient and supported by the British government primarily to improve its bargaining position with “the Six”. In short term, the EFTA failed to fulfil its role as a “bridge – builder”: the EEC countries

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27 The economic benefits went mainly to Sweden and Switzerland. Over the first three years of its existence, British exports to the EFTA countries rose by 33%. Over the same period, British exports to the EEC countries rose by 55%. J. Ramsden, op. cit. p. 346.
refused to take it seriously. In medium term, it was a diplomatic own – goal for Britain, as it set up another major obstacle to membership of the EEC.\textsuperscript{28}

The EEC, by contrast, enjoyed rapid success. Despite British protests, the programme of tariff adjustments was accelerated. With the exception of Belgium, the EEC countries enjoyed economic growth rates much higher than Britain.\textsuperscript{29} Britain’s non – membership threatened to exclude it from some of the world’s major growth markets, and leave it dependent on the Commonwealth, whose economies were increasingly successful at competing with British goods.\textsuperscript{30} Political and economic developments combined to provoke reassessment of Britain’s relations with Europe from the mid – 1950s onwards. The swift liquidation of the British Empire was one factor. The opposition of the USA and even some Commonwealth countries to the disastrous 1956 Anglo – French Suez crisis expedition was a defining moment, which destroyed lingering illusions of Britain’s world power status. Continuing economic problems evidenced by low growth, adverse trade balances and recurring sterling crises contrasted with the strong economic performance of the EEC countries. Thus Harold Macmillan’s Conservative government sought entry in 1961. The decline in Britain’s international standing and economic downturn was the main reasons for Britain’s official entry to the EEC in 1973.


\textsuperscript{30} A. Milward, op.cit., p. 23.
III. OFFICIAL ENTRY TO THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (1973)

A number of historians have concluded that Britain's application to join the EEC was an attempt to restore its deteriorating position in all three of its foreign policy's “circles.”\(^\text{31}\) As a result, on 31 July 1961, Macmillan announced in the House of Commons that Britain would be seeking negotiations on the terms of British membership. Those negotiations protracted till 14 January 1963, when the French President Charles de Gaulle decided to veto Britain's application. He emphasised that Britain did not seem committed to Europe. For him, this had a particular meaning: Britain was too committed to the Commonwealth and the United States. His own vision of Europe as a “third force” would be fatally undermined by the entry of Britain, which he regarded as an America “Trojan Horse.”\(^\text{32}\) However, his critique of Britain's application went deep: in his view, “the nature, the structure of Britain made it fundamentally different from the continent.”\(^\text{33}\) De Gaulle's veto was “a blow to the prestige of the Macmillan government from which the Conservatives did not really recover.”\(^\text{34}\) Most writers argued that Britain's first application came too late: Britain had already missed the European boat.\(^\text{35}\) Britain was not yet ready to make the adjustments necessitated by the EEC membership, while the EEC itself was still too young to accommodate the changes which British membership at that time might have entailed.

In 1964 the Labour Party came to power and Harold Wilson became prime minister. His election campaign had been resonant with images of


\(^{33}\) Ibidem.

\(^{34}\) R. Lamb, op.cit., p. 9.

modernization and “the scientific revolution”. However, he inherited deteriorating economic situation from the Conservatives, which it then proceeded to make worse. The crux of the problem was the pressure on the pound caused by the balance of payments deficit. The causes of this were long term and plentiful, including over-reliance on declining industries, lack of investment and low productivity, as import controls were largely ruled out by international agreement (GATT) and the threat of retaliation. Britain could afford to retreat into a siege economy because its economic existence was dependent to an unusual extent on foreign trade. One of the possible solutions was devaluation of the pound, but H. Wilson wanted to avoid it. Instead, he negotiated a $2 billion loan from the USA, but to no avail. The worst crisis came in July 1966, when a national seamen’s strike, compounding a depressing set of economic indicators, triggered a severe run on the pound. H. Wilson accepted the case for devaluation, but he recognized that it would be more acceptable to the British public and the international money markets if it was part of a whole package of measures, including membership in the EEC. The race was therefore on, to join the EEC before being forced to devalue outside.

A whole host of reasons conspired to edge Wilson towards launching a second British application: changes in the international sphere, in the Communities themselves, the hope of reversing Britain’s economic decline and the need to find a framework for the inevitable devaluation. Added to this were pressures from the Foreign Office, the Confederation of British Industries, much of the press and European-minded pressure groups. There was also evidence of widespread public support for British membership. Party politics also pointed to a renewed application. The March 1966 election gave Wilson more leeway to adopt his policies. Apart from it, a large number of the new intake of Labour MPs were known to be pro –

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36 A. May, op.cit., p. 41.
37 Ibidem.
40 In mid 1966 opinion polls found 70% of respondents in favour of joining the “Common Market”, See: H. Durant, op.cit, p. 49.
European. Finally, a foreign policy “miracle” was needed to distract attention from difficulties with the economy and other foreign policy areas.41

On 2 May 1967 H. Wilson announced the government’s intention to apply for membership. A week later there followed a three–day Commons debate. The result (488 to 62 in favour of the application) was never in doubt, given that the front benches of all two major parties supported the proposal.42 But the French President Ch. De Gaulle made clear that he still objected to British entry. In particular, he believed that Britain would be a “Trojan Horse” for America. Moreover, de Gaulle now raised the question of whether Britain’s economy was so weak that British membership would harm the existing “Six” and he insisted that Britain should end sterling’s role as a reserve currency.43 The negotiations, which started in July 1967 made swift progress, largely because the British (learning from their 1961–63 experience) kept their conditions to a minimum.44 However, at press conference on 27 November 1967 Ch. De Gaulle declared that there was still “a very vast and deep mutation to be effected” by Britain before France could accept it as a fellow–member of the Communities.45 Consequently, France issued a formal veto on 16 May 1968.46

De Gaulle’s successor, Georges Pompidou, was significantly more favourable to the European Communities and more open to British membership than de Gaulle himself. Indeed, he saw Britain as a potential counterweight to Germany, now the economic giant. In Britain, H. Wilson was replaced by Edward Heath from the Conservative Party in 1970. Unlike Wilson, he was fully committed to the idea of joining Europe and he was not a “Commonwealth man” and he appears to have regarded the Commonwealth

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41 U. Kitzinger, op.cit., p. 130.
42 Ibidem.
44 Commonwealth obstacles were reduced to a British request for special arrangements for Carribean sugar and New Zealand lamb and dairy products. The agriculture was accepted in full. For the other EFTA countries, Britain requested only a year’s transitional arrangements. U. Kitzinger, op.cit., p. 134.
45 P.M. H. Bell, op.cit., p. 90.
46 Britain was forced to carry out the devaluation on 18 November 1967 and it had a big impact on de Gaulle’s decision. Ibidem.
mainly as an irritant. He was also decidedly cool about the Anglo–American relationship. He disliked the term “special relationship” and he urge that London should “turn more to Paris, Bonn and Rome”. The Conservative Party had by now emerged as “the party of Europe”.

Strictly speaking, Britain did not have to make a third application to join the EEC. The negotiations started on 30 June 1970. The most difficult items arose from aspects of Community policies which had been agreed since 1961–63 and which had therefore not been at issue in the original negotiations: in particular the Community budget, monetary union and fisheries.

After the Heath – Pompidou summit, which took place on 20–21 May 1971 in Paris agreements were reached on New Zealand butter and Caribbean sugar. Britain was allowed a six–year transitional period for agriculture and the common external tariff. On fisheries the outlines Britain was allowed to preserve 90% of its fish catch for ten years, with a review to follow. The French now accepted British assurances that sterling balances would be gradually run down. The budgetary question still proved intractable, but Britain agreed to accept a phasing–in of contributions over seven years, together with an assurance that if problems became unacceptable “the very survival of the Community would demand that the institutions find equitable solutions.”

On the basis agreed in Paris, the government drafted a White paper recommending British entry. It was published in July 1971. The crucial European debate took place in the Commons on 21 to 28 October 1971. The Labour Party was generally against and wanted to renegotiate the terms of entry. However its leader – James Callaghan asked what he would do if the renegotiations failed – replied merely that “We would sit down amicably and discuss the situation.” The result was a triumph for E. Heath: 356 to

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48 Ibidem.
51 Ibidem.
The parliamentary battle was over. The Treaty of Accession was signed on 22 January 1972 and it necessitated the passage of the European Communities Bill. On 17 October the bill received an official consent from the Queen (the royal assent) and Britain, together with Denmark and Ireland officially entered the European Communities on 1 January 1973.

As number of writers have pointed out, Britain chose the worst moment at which to join the EEC: just when the long economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s was coming to an end, to be replaced by much harder economic climes. The slide into international recession was already underway by the time the OPEC oil–producing states doubled the price of oil in October 1972 and in December 1973. For the rest of the decade, Britain and other western industrialized countries experienced low or negative economic growth, spiraling inflation, rising unemployment. It is worth mentioning that Britain had already begun participating in the work of the Communities before its membership formally began. But it was a “selective participation”. The British negotiators had always threatened to veto progress on the Community issues, unless an agreement was reached on lines acceptable to Britain, according to its national interests only. A good example set Heath’s plan for a common energy policy. Finally, he opposed an agreement on the distribution of energy resources within the EEC. With North Sea oil beginning to be developed, he saw it as a plot to deprive Britain of its oil. Generally, Heath steadily blocked progress in areas important to other countries, while demanding special treatment in areas of particular interest to Britain. By the time his government fell in 1974, Britain had already begun to acquire a reputation as an “awkward partner”.

However, this portrayal is only partly justified. There were some crucial areas in which Britain was one of the leading advocates. However, its national interest has always been put on first place. That is why its participation in the European Communities has always been selective.

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53 In May 1972 Britain joined the “snake” which linker European exchange rates, but pulled out the following month. Ibidem.

IV. BRITAIN’S PRESENCE IN THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES
(1973 ONWARDS)

British entry into the European club failed to settle the issue of its relations with Europe, as the British conversion to the European Communities was never whole-hearted. The economic benefits of the UK entry were not immediately obvious. Partly this was because Britain joined too late to influence the shape and early development of the European Communities. Thus the UK had to sign up to rules designed by others to meet the economic needs of the original six member states. The British economy with its relatively tiny agricultural sector was unlikely to benefit significantly from the Common Agricultural Policy, which then absorbed three-quarters of the EC budget. Moreover, 1973, the year of Britain’s entry, was also the year of the energy crisis which signaled the end of the post-war economic boom. The original members of the EC had enjoyed substantial growth, the early years of the UK membership were accompanied by stagflation.

Thus Community membership remained politically controversial in Britain. The only mainstream political party consistently in favour were the Liberals (and subsequently Liberal Democrats). The bulk of the Labour Party had opposed the entry in 1973. The return of their government under H. Wilson again in 1974 entailed a renegotiation of the terms of entry. In general, all that Britain was able to achieve was an agreement to review the bases of the pricing policy. The most difficult item in the negotiations was the size of Britain’s budget contribution. On 5 June 1975 a referendum took place, resulting in a 67.2% majority for staying in the EEC.

55 R. Leach, et. al., op.cit., p. 272.
56 Ibidem.
57 In May 1974 the Treasury forecast forecast that at the end of the transitional arrangements (in 1980) Britain would be contributing 24% of the budget, compared with a share of GNP of only 14%. A. May, op.cit, p. 60. The formula was agreed in 1975, but with the additional proviso that any rebate should be limited to 125 million pounds. Ibidem.
58 32.8% were against, with a turnout 64.6%. D. Butler, U. Kitzinger, The 1975 Referendum, Macmillan, London 1996, p. 341.
the issue. On the British left the EC were widely perceived as a rich man's capitalist club, providing the economic underpinning for NATO. By 1983, and back in opposition, Labour was pledged to withdraw from the EC without even a prior referendum.\(^{59}\)

Most Conservatives were then far more enthusiastic about Europe. After all, Britain's membership in the EEC was their achievement. When Margaret Thatcher took office in 1979, it would have been reasonable to expect a more positive approach to Europe than from the previous government. However, the problem arose from the malfunctioning of the 1975 rebate mechanism and the escalating cost of the Common Agriculture Policy. It dominated Britain's relations with its European partners for the next five years. Eventually an agreement was reached at Fontainebleau in June 1984 (the famous: "I want my money back"), by which M. Thatcher accepted a rebate of 66% of the difference between British VAT contributions (but not tariffs or import levies) and the EC receipts. In return, she agreed an increase in the EC revenue from 1 to 1.4% of national VAT receipts.\(^{60}\) This agreement was little different from proposals rejected by Thatcher on several previous occasions.\(^{61}\)

With the budget question for the moment settled, "there were indications that, under M. Thatcher, Britain might be becoming more communautaire".\(^{62}\) She went to a sign and endorsed the 1986 Single European Act, where the single market was to be achieved by 1992.\(^{63}\) M. Thatcher portrayed this as a triumph of her diplomacy. Apart from the single market, majority voting would be introduced in specific areas, but not on such matters as taxation, frontiers controls and employment law. Most majority voting would be

\(^{59}\) R. Leach, et. al., op.cit., p. 273.
\(^{60}\) A. May, op.cit., p. 70.
\(^{61}\) Ibidem, p. 71.
\(^{62}\) S. Greenwood, op.cit., p. 11.
\(^{63}\) The proposal to complete the single market was set out in a British government document *Europe – The Future*. According to David Reynolds, Britain was afraid of the danger that it would be left on the sidelines in a "two-speed" Europe. A common market in services as well as goods, the removal of “non-tariff” barriers and the free movement of capital and labour fitted in perfectly with Thatcher’s commitment to deregulation and increasing opportunities for enterprise. D. Reynolds, op.cit., p. 267. See also: M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, Harper Collins, London 1993, p. 548.
so-called “qualified majority voting (two-thirds of the votes in the Council of Ministers). However, M. Thatcher was forced to accept a commitment to move towards economic and monetary union. Moreover, on the question of institutional reform, Thatcher did not appear to realize "the extent to which her acceptance of the Single Act brought her along the conveyor belt to closer union".64 Thatcher’s refusal to agree to the harmonization if indirect taxation continued to cause dissention within the Community, while her refusal to remove frontiers controls resulted in the inner core of Europe going ahead without her.65 However, it was in accordance of Britain’s national interest, because Britain wanted to keep its own immigration policy. As John Pinder has observed, rather than marking the limits of integration, as Thatcher hoped, the Single European Act contributed to the momentum of further change, by ‘opening out new opportunities for the proponents of Union.”66

M. Thatcher expressed her attitude towards Europe in the famous speech at Bruges in 1988. For her, Europe was a threat to Britain’s national sovereignty: “to try to suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of the European conglomerate would be highly damaging (…) We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain only to see them reimposed at a European level with a European superstate exercising a new dominance from Brussels”.67 Even so, M. Thatcher (reluctantly) agreed to UK entry to the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) in October 1990 and it was only after her fall from power soon afterwards that her opposition towards to the whole European project intensified. Her successor, John Major seemed more enthusiastic about Europe.68 However, the Maastricht Treaty (1992), creating the European Union, was to mark further divisions

65 Britain did not take part in the Schengen agreement signed in 1985, banning frontiers control among the members of “the Schengen area”.
66 J. Pinder, op.cit., p. 78.
67 R. Leach, et. al., op.cit., p. 273.
68 He stated: “My aim for Britain in the Community can be simply stated. I want us to be where we belong. At the very heart of Europe. Working with our partners in building the future”. Ibidem.
with Britain's European partners, as J. Major negotiated an opt–out from the Social Charter and monetary union⁶⁹.

When the Labour Party came to power in 1997, its leader Tony Blair had much more positive attitude to the European Union.⁷⁰ However, the divisions remained, especially on the keys issues of the monetary union, economic and foreign policy. As for monetary union, T. Blair did commit his government to a referendum concerning the introduction of euro, but opinion polls continued to suggest that he would have great difficulty in winning. The new crisis over the “European Constitution” and the “Treaty of Lisbon” means there is little immediate prospect for Britain joining the euro zone.⁷¹ Concerning the economy, it is sometimes suggested that Blair preferred what has come to be called “the Anglo–Saxon or American free market model of capitalism rather than the more interventionism European model. More significant are the differences that emerged over foreign policy since 11 September 2001, with Blair as the closest ally of the USA in the fight against terrorism. This was in marked contrast to French and German reservations over US policy in general. As a result, Britain is still perceived as an “awkward partner”, but this view is only partly justified. Britain has always been in favor of the European integration, but only when it was in accordance with its national interests. There were some areas, like “the single market”, where the UK became one of the “advocates of Europe”.

V. SOME POLITICAL ASPECTS OF BRITAIN’S MEMBERSHIP IN THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

One of the major political implications of Britain's membership in the European Communities is the fact that the British government and the Westminster Parliament have had to accept the supremacy of the European law over the UK law. The question is: how far has parliamentary sovereignty

⁶⁹ The Maastricht Treaty was ratified in Britain on 2 August 1993 and it was deeply divisive for the Conservative Party. Ibidem.
⁷⁰ His government quickly signed up to the Social Charter.
⁷¹ The ”European Constitution” was rejected in referenda in France and the Netherlands. The ”Treaty of Lisbon” was rejected in a referendum in Ireland in June 2008. See: www.euobserver.com.
been impaired by membership in the European Communities? The European Communities Act (1972) gave the force of law in Britain to obligations arising under the EC treaties and it gave the European law general and binding authority.\textsuperscript{72} It provided that the Community law should take precedence over all inconsistent UK law and it precluded the British Parliament from legislating on matters within the EC competence where it had formulated rules.\textsuperscript{73} Some argue that parliamentary sovereignty is not impaired, because membership in the EC has not broken the principle that Parliament cannot bind its future action.\textsuperscript{74} Thus, the European Communities Act could be repealed (and indeed had the 1975 referendum on continuing membership of the EC gone the other way, the UK would almost certainly have withdrawn from the Communities). However, while Britain remains a member of the Communities it does appear that parliamentary sovereignty has been impaired. In effect, the British Parliament has bound itself procedurally by the 1972 European Communities Act so that in areas of the EC legislative competence its law is supreme and the British courts give it precedence over national UK law where the two conflict.\textsuperscript{75} Thus, since 1973, Britain has possessed “dual constitutional arrangements, as an independent state and as a number of the European Communities (Union)”\textsuperscript{76} Since then it has had, and still has, “a parallel constitution”.

Membership in the European Communities has had an impact on other aspects of the British political system. The referendum was first introduced into Britain (1975) for a vote on whether country should remain in the European Communities and has since become an accepted if irregular mechanism for settling controversial issues of a constitutional nature. Apart from it, membership in the Communities contributed significantly to the pressures for electoral reform in the UK.\textsuperscript{77} Britain’s first-past-the-post elec-

\textsuperscript{72} E. Magee, P. Lynch, \textit{The changing British constitution}, “Politics Review”, 2003, 13/2, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{73} R. Leach, et. al., op.cit., p.172.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibidem
\textsuperscript{77} P. Dunleavy, H. Margetts, \textit{The electoral system}, ”Parliamentary Affairs”, 1997, 50/4, p. 86–90.
toral system produced even more disproportionate results in election for the European Parliament than it did for Westminster and the UK system was markedly out of line with that used by other member states. Thus, in 1999 the regional list system was used for British elections to the European Parliament. Although pressures for electoral reform existed prior to the EC membership, they were strengthened by European precedents.

Membership in the European Communities has had considerable implications for British parties and the party system. Both major parties have been split over Europe. Labour was deeply divided on the issue from the 1960s onwards. They became far more pro–European under T. Blair premiership. Conservative divisions date back at least as far as Labour’s, but were initially less disastrous for the party. Conflicting attitudes towards Europe caused tension within M. Thatcher’s last administration, but became far more damaging under J. Major, threatening the survival of his government. These divisions helped to undermine any immediate prospects of the Conservative Party recovery after the landslide defeat of 1997. It is worth mentioning that the European issue has also spawned new parties with some impact on the British political scene. Thus the single issue Referendum Party appeared a threat to the Conservatives in 1997. Apart from it the UK Independence Party managed to win three seats in the European Parliament elections in 1999.

79 It was the European issue that was a major factor in the 1981 Social Democratic Party (SDP) split from Labour and it helped ensure Conservative dominance for 18 years. See: A. Nicholls, Britain and the European Communities: the historical background, Macmillan, London 1990, p. 134.
80 T. Blair emphasised, that “for the first time in a decade Britain sets a positive agenda for Europe”. Nevertheless, he also pointed out, that his government “ensured continued protection for our essential interests in all the areas in which we sought it”. See: A. May, op.cit., p. 89. While Blair had ended one “opt-out” on the Social Charter, but negotiated another – on the incorporation of the Schengen agreement. Ibidem.
81 They won 418 seats in the House of Commons, while the Conservatives 165. See: www.labour.org.uk.
82 See: www.europa.eu.
The need to organize for European elections, and subsequently the need to become a part of European parties in the European parliament, has some effects for the major British parties. For Labourers this was perhaps less of a problem as the party was a member of the Socialist International and leading Labour politicians (like Neil Kinnock) used to cooperate with European socialists and social democrats. Thus they have been consistent members of the European Socialist Party. The conservatives find the search for acceptable ideologically sympathetic partners in Europe rather more difficult.

Generally, Britain's membership in the European Communities has always been a divisive issue in British politics, leading to splits in old parties and the establishment of new ones. It also has some implications for the British political system, especially for the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, which is one of the most important pillars of this system.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Britain initially failed to engage with the movement for European integration, because of continuing illusion of world power status, the special relationship with the United States and continuing ties with the Commonwealth. One of the factors which impelled Britain to seek a membership in the European Communities in the 1960s was the disparity between British economic growth rates and those of the “Six”. Britain was unfortunate in entering the EC just when the economic crisis of the 1970s began to take effect. Its membership was therefore associated with economic dislocation and recession rather than growth. Britain eventually joined the European Communities in 1973, but it was too late to have an influence on the EC institutions and policies.

Arguably, it has been in the political, rather than the economic sphere that the effects of British membership have been most significant, as well as

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83 However, in the 1980s, Britain achieved an average growth rate of 2.2% a year, compared with 2.1% for France. See: P.M. H. Bell, op.cit., p. 237. The EC membership also played a crucial role in attracting investment from abroad. In 1991, 53% of all Japanese direct investment in the EC came to Britain. See: G. Stephen, op.cit, p. 95.
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most controversial. UK membership in the EC has always been a divisive issue in British politics, leading to splits in old parties and the establishment of new ones. Apart from it, UK membership has contested implication for the British political system. The areas in which the EC has been authorized to act have expanded. Britain, like other EC member–states, has been committed to giving precedence to EC law over UK law. This has meant a substantial erosion of the traditional British legal and parliamentary system. It also proves the fact of “erosion” Britain’s national sovereignty. The question which arises when the “loss” of sovereignty is discussed is, “What is the alternative?” In age of interdependence, an insistence on national sovereignty may actually diminish a nation’s capacity to attain its objectives. Conversely, the “pooling” of sovereignty is in many areas the most effective, and in some areas the only way of exercising it.

Britain used to be perceived as an “awkward partner” in European affairs. This view is only partly justified. Based on its very specific understanding of national sovereignty, Britain has developed a much more pragmatic and instrumental approach towards European integration than most of its partners on the continent. Nevertheless, the country was a strong driving force in favor of integration in many crucial policy fields like: the single market and trade policy or the EU expansion in 2004. Britain’s membership in the European Communities has always been selective, in accordance to its national interests only, mainly in the economic dimension. When exclusion from the Communities could threaten national interests, Britain has always accepted the need for its membership in the “United Europe”.

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