

Attempts to measure UK influence within the EU are admirable, but it is questionable whether they really influence the public debate

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*UK citizens are traditionally considered to have an uneasy relationship with Europe. Prompted by the growing debate around the upcoming European elections, **Giulia Pastorella** reviews the 2014 Scorecard published by the pro-EU pressure group British Influence, which aims to provide an objective assessment of the British government's influence in the EU. She writes that while this and other attempts to map the UK's relationship with the EU provide valuable information, it is questionable whether such studies feed through into the wider public debate.*



Debates about Europe in the UK are as numerous as laws coming from Brussels, some would say. Unfortunately, they are not always based on facts. Each side confidently asserts its position, often relying on myths, rhetoric, outdated figures, speculations and hearsay. This is why British Influence, a pro-EU pressure group, has published its [2014 Scorecard](#). It aims at providing an evidence-based assessment of the British government's influence in the EU in order to encourage a better-informed national debate.

The first of an annual series, the scorecard is produced by an independent, cross-party panel chaired by Lord Hannay of Chiswick, which also includes well-known EU expert Charles Grant, director of the Centre for European Reform. It assesses the degree of British success in key policy areas over the last year. The scorecard adopts a traffic light rating system, widely used in business, which is easy to grasp: a red light means the UK has failed to reach its objectives, an amber light that the UK has only partially succeeded in reaching them, and a green light means that it has reached at least some of them. Such straightforward visual classification and the lack of EU jargon make the scorecard accessible to an educated, but by no means expert, audience.

How does the UK perform?

The four policy areas considered cover most important aspects of EU activity, including those at the centre of heated debates. For instance Part I, dedicated to the Single Market and Economic Affairs, touches upon issues of immigration, and reassures Eurosceptics that, in fact, EU migrants are outnumbered by non-EU migrants, and the former contribute 34 per cent more to the public finances than they take out in benefits. However, it gives a red light to the controversial Financial Transaction Tax, which is likely to go ahead as an 'enhanced cooperation' procedure despite Britain's strong opposition. For some cases, the scorecard also describes instances when the UK undermined its own objectives, such as the completion of the internal energy market. Despite being a British priority, it was crippled by Britain's failure to transpose EU electricity and gas as directives. Predictably, and reassuringly, Britain scores well in its traditional forte, foreign policy, notwithstanding some bumps – Turkey's delayed accession, and the collective failure in Ukraine, to name the two main ones.



British Foreign Secretary William Hague, Credit: Chatham House (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

A very interesting, and rather more specialised chapter is dedicated to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, a new factor in the EU when it comes to assign competences between Member States and EU institutions. The British parliament – and all its European counterparts – have clearly not made sufficient use of the [yellow/orange card procedure](#), which nonetheless could reveal itself a very powerful control mechanism on the Commission.

Finally, but not trivially, the scorecard concludes that too few British nationals work in the EU institutions, weakening the UK's collective networking strength. Having agents on the ground, as it were, is a necessary, though not sufficient condition for British influence in any policy area. This risky tendency should be reverted, not only according to British Influence but also according to common sense.

Problems with the scorecard concept

While a welcome and laudable exercise, the scorecard struggles, by its own admission, to provide an objective measure of influence. Broadly defined in the introduction as the capacity to achieve objectives and to work effectively to put forward its interests, it might fail to capture some of the collaborative dynamics and bargains which are the daily functioning of EU institutions. In other words, very often the tone seems to imply that the UK has – or should have – an influence *on* the EU, rather than *in* the EU.

It must be noted that the scorecard is only one of the numerous current attempts at a factual reappraisal of British debates about Europe. The most remarkable example is of course the government's [Review of the Balance of Competences](#) – from which the scorecard drew its policy areas. This unprecedented audit exercise, despite all the criticism it has raised, is a timely initiative, and one that will be a useful basis for David Cameron's plans for renegotiation. Increasingly, businesses and trade associations have started to make their hard facts known too (e.g. through a recent [report](#) by the Confederation of British Industry).

These attempts at providing solid evidence on EU-related issues are nevertheless faced with the reality that the EU debate does not seem to be about facts and figures. Rather, those who care, like businesses, already know them, and those who do not know them, such as the broader public, might never get around to reading the scorecard. Intra-party disagreements demonstrate that the debate on Europe is not just about identity politics either. It seems that the debate, as the scorecard rightly points out in its foreword by director Peter Wilding, is about what the UK wants to be, in and of itself, as exemplified by the Scottish debate, and in the European context. But such projections cannot be reasonably made without a basis of evidence to start with.

Until now, adapting Schopenhauer's famous quote, discussions about the EU in Britain were a pendulum between pain and boredom. The EU was either ignored as some distant relative, with poor turnout in European elections and few mentions in parliamentary debates, or it was seen as a thorn in the flesh of the country, providing support for far-right parties and causing political instability. The scorecard and other similar initiatives help stop this oscillation and fix the pendulum on what the UK actually *wants*, *does* and *achieves* in the EU. Indeed, in the best pragmatic British tradition, this is what public opinion and policy makers should care about.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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