

Then and Now: Serbian Students' Attitudes on Megxit

Biljana Djoric Francuski, University of Belgrade, Serbia

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Abstract

At the time when Harry and Meghan dramatically announced their departure from the UK, that decision came as a surprise even to those who closely observed events on the British Royal Court, and like a bolt out of the blue to others. Although numerous articles and books have been published on *Megxit* over the past four years, the real reasons for this phenomenon have yet to be fully ascertained. This research into Harry and Meghan's chronicle started immediately after *Megxit* happened, with a case study that was carried out with third-year students at the English Department of Belgrade University's Faculty of Philology. The students had one simple task: to describe what they saw as the main cause or causes for *Megxit*, and they were given the liberty to choose the form and length of their writing. It is important to underline that the respondents had already completed three courses in British Studies: about UK's history, institutions and culture, and were starting the fourth course, so their knowledge about the British Royal Family was quite adequate. Nowadays, after a sufficiently long time distance, it is rather interesting to analyse the views of Serbian students regarding *Megxit* and to compare them with what has been revealed so far. The main purpose of this paper is to ascertain whether the students have mastered the topics covered by their British Studies curricula sufficiently enough to provide reasonable causes for *Megxit*.

Keywords: Harry and Meghan, *Megxit*, Serbian Students

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Introduction

"We do not have knowledge of a thing until we have grasped its why, that is to say, its cause." (Aristotle, *Physics*)

Although a plethora of articles on *Megxit* have been published in various media, as well as a dozen books, since it happened four years ago, the real reasons for this phenomenon have yet to be fully ascertained. Far less was known at the time when British Prince Harry and his wife Meghan Markle, Duke and Duchess of Sussex, dramatically announced their departure from Harry's home and from the UK, so the decision came as a surprise even to those who closely monitored the situation on the British Royal Court, and like a bolt out of the blue to those who were not so well-informed.

This research into Harry and Meghan's chronicle and analysis of the causes for *Megxit* started immediately after it happened, but the insight into the real story gets more complicated with every new article and every new book, with fresh and different perspectives on the event revealed in this never-ending series. As soon as the Sussexes announced their decision, a case study was carried out with third-year students at the English Department of Belgrade University's Faculty of Philology, with one simple task: to describe what they saw as the main reason or reasons for the couple's decision to leave. Students were given the liberty to choose the time, form, length and content of their writing, so the results ranged from short one-sentence answers to entire essays. It is important to underline that the respondents had already completed three courses in British Studies: about the United Kingdom's history, institutions and culture, and were starting the fourth course, so their knowledge about the British Royal Family was quite adequate.

Nowadays, after a sufficiently long time distance, it is rather interesting to analyse the views of Serbian students regarding *Megxit* and to compare them with what has been revealed so far. The results of this analysis will show, by ascertaining whether our students were right in naming what they thought the reasons for *Megxit* are, that they acquired a sufficient knowledge base throughout their courses in British Studies.

The Sussexes in a Nutshell ... and Out

Prince Henry Charles Albert David, Duke of Sussex – worldwide simply known as Prince Harry – was born into the British royal house of Windsor, at a time when his late grandmother HM Queen Elizabeth II was the Head of State of the United Kingdom and many other Commonwealth Realms. His father, the then Prince of Wales, is now HM King Charles III and his late mother was Lady Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales. Harry's eldest brother Prince William, who is now heir apparent to the British throne, is married to Catherine Elizabeth (Kate) Middleton and they have three children.

In his recently published memoir *Spare*, Harry thus specifies the basic difference between himself and his brother: "Two years older than me, Willy was the Heir, whereas I was the Spare" (19). Although the mocking phrase about *an heir and a spare* was coined almost a hundred years before the brothers were even born, as it dates from the 19th century, "he felt that he was treated as the "spare" by the media and some members of his family" (*dictionary.com* 2023). And that is exactly the feeling which Harry unambiguously reveals in his biography *Spare*: "I was the shadow, the support, the Plan B. I was brought into the world in case something happened to Willy. I was summoned to provide backup, distraction,

diversion and, if necessary, a spare part. Kidney, perhaps. Blood transfusion. Speck of bone marrow. This was all made explicitly clear to me from the start of life's journey and regularly reinforced thereafter. I was twenty the first time I heard the story of what Pa allegedly said to Mummy the day of my birth: *Wonderful! Now you've given me an Heir and a Spare—my work is done*" (20). Same as his brother, Prince Harry attended the Royal Military Academy and served in the military but, unlike William, Harry also saw combat as a helicopter pilot in a war zone. Namely, at that time William was the second in line to the throne and it was estimated that the risk of sending him to war was "too great", whereas for Harry it was "acceptable" (*nationalpost.com* 2023).

In 2016, Prince Harry met Rachel Meghan Markle on a blind date and they got married in 2018. Despite the facts that Meghan was an American actress, a biracial raised Catholic and had been married before, Harry received explicit permission and full support of the royal family for this marriage. They were conferred with the titles of Duke and Duchess of Sussex, and their son Archie Harrison Mountbatten-Windsor was born in 2019. In January 2020, Harry and Meghan announced that they would "step back as senior members of the Royal Family" (*BBC News* 2020), moved to Canada, and later to the USA, where their daughter Lilibet 'Lili' Diana Mountbatten-Windsor was born in 2021.

Ironically, though the persecution of the royal couple by paparazzi (or 'the paps' – as Harry calls them in his memoir, p. 24), in printed media and on the Internet, has frequently been cited as one of the main reasons for their decision to leave the UK, that event additionally spurred on the interest of – more often than not – malicious reporters of their not only day-to-day but even minute-to-minute life. So many articles, both in the press but also by the academia, as well as entire books, have been devoted to this topic that only a few of them could find place in this paper. However, it is interesting that several in-depth books were published almost as soon as the split happened, and that trend has continued to this day. These are the titles of some of them: *Royals at War: The Untold Story of Harry and Meghan's Shocking Split with the House of Windsor* by Dylan Howard and Andy Tillet (2020), *Meghan and Harry: The Real Story* by Lady Colin Campbell (2020), *Finding Freedom: Harry and Meghan and the Making of a Modern Royal Family* by Omid Scobie and Carolyn Durand (2020), *Battle of Brothers: William and Harry – The Inside Story of a Family in Tumult* by Robert Lacey (2020), *Brothers and Wives: Inside the Private Lives of William, Kate, Harry, and Meghan* by Christopher Andersen (2021), *Revenge: Meghan, Harry, and the War Between the Windsors* by Tom Bower (2022), *Courtiers: The Hidden Power Behind the Crown* (2022) by Valentine Low, again published in 2023 as *Courtiers: Intrigue, Ambition, and the Power Players Behind the House of Windsor*, memoir *Spare* by Prince Harry (2023), and *Endgame: Inside the Royal Family and the Monarchy's Fight for Survival* by Omid Scobie (2023).

The Sussexes' decision to break ties with the Royal Family was nicknamed *Megxit* by jesters on social media. Definitions of this neologism, coined by joining words Meghan and exit, vary in different sources, but they all refer to the same event, for instance: "*Megxit* is a slang term for the decision of couple Meghan Markle and Prince Harry to step back from their senior roles in the British royal family" (*Megxit* 2021) or "a humorous term for the decision of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex to step back from their royal duties" (Balteiro 2022: 37). However, the term had been used with a different meaning long before the event, as many as two years earlier – to be precise, since the couple's wedding: "On social media in 2018–19, some used *Megxit* to insult Meghan Markle and express a desire for her to leave the British royal family. Some of these insults appear to have a racist and sexist character" (*Megxit*

2021). The neologism was originally the trademark of "online trolls who have long used #Megxit as a rallying cry for a campaign of hate against the duchess", and who, using hate speech, "urged Meghan to exit the royal family and trafficked in racist and/or sexist abuse" (Ruiz 2020). Paradoxically, the initial usage of *Megxit* was to mark the phenomenon – persecution and insults in the media and on social networks – which would become one of the main causes for the occurrence of *Megxit* in the sense the word is mostly used nowadays. On a deeper level, the choice of her name and not her husband's name for coining this neologism firmly suggests that it was widely thought the 'culprit' for the event was Meghan alone (Kornilieva 2021: 56) and not Harry, who is allegedly under such a great influence by his wife that he is at times called "Mister Markle" (Kornilieva 2021: 57).

In academic circles, as well, various aspects of this event have been researched, including the linguistic ones, focusing on such elements as the unavoidable pun of *Megxit* as a wordplay on Brexit, or the lexical productivity of the neologism *Megxit*. In her paper *From Brexit to Megxit – Leaving Britain in (Royal) Style*, the title of which exemplifies the pun, Aleksandrova points to "The parallel between the two neologisms" and stresses that *Megxit* "is used with phrases and in structures typically used with the neologism *Brexit*" (2020: 1452), for which she gives four examples from the press: *hard Megxit*, *soft Megxit*, *Megxit deal* and *Megxit bill*. Regarding lexicalization and word-formation, the same author underlines that "*Megxit* can function as a noun, as a verb, or attributively to characterize a noun" (2020: 1452), whereas other new words have also been "derived from *Megxit*, such as *Megxitee*, *Mexiteer*, *Megxiter*, while others are a combination of the personal name *Meghan* and another suffix (*Megulators*, *Meghangate*)" (2020: 1451).

Analysis of Research Question Results and Discussion

Less than a month after Harry and Meghan posted their decision on Instagram (on 8 January 2020), third-year students at the English Department of Belgrade University's Faculty of Philology who had just started the course in British Cultural Studies 2 were asked (during the introductory class on 7 February 2020) to answer a one-question survey. The focus group consisted of all students who were present in class on that day – 23 of them in total, out of whom 20 were female and 3 male (which is not surprising, bearing in mind that the number of female students at our Faculty of Philology surpasses by far the number of male students). The research instrument was an open-ended one-question survey, and the aim of the case study was to test the students' previous knowledge about British culture and more specifically the British Royal Family, by analysing their assumptions about different factors that had led to *Megxit*. In order for this study to be as non-biased as possible, the question they were asked was extracted as part of a newspaper title: What are Harry and Meghan thinking? (Ng 2020), and the only explanation given to students was that they should describe what they saw as the main cause or causes for *Megxit*.

Prior to the survey, during both semesters of their first year of study, the students had listened to and passed two introductory courses in British Studies (1 and 2), as well as British Cultural Studies 1 in the first semester of their third year of study. These courses primarily focused on background information, involving British history, the study of British civilisation, life and institutions in the UK, but also included cultural studies in general. Although historical development of the UK was an important part of the syllabus, the overall work with students was aimed at interdisciplinary study of contemporary social, economic and political issues in the UK, by exploring the richness and diversity of British culture. It is, nevertheless, vital to emphasise that, as *Megxit* happened during the winter break, it had not been discussed in

class, so students had to rely only on their previous knowledge about the British Royal Family and on what they had read or heard about *Megxit* out of class.

As for the precise instructions regarding their task, the students were told that what mattered the most was their personal opinion, based on the facts and information they had already been provided with in class, but they were completely free to choose the form and length of their writing, and were given as much time as they needed. Some students wrote their answers in point form, but most of them opted for a series of complete sentences in the form of an essay. There were only two short one-sentence answers of 9 and 14 words, respectively. Although 23 respondents took part in the survey, some of them supplied several reasons for *Megxit*, which were then analysed separately, as different aspects that interacted with each other. This is why the total number of reasons for *Megxit* in the results of this research is higher than the number of respondents. Also, the answers have been included in this paper as they were written originally, without changing anything or correcting occasional grammatical or spelling mistakes.

For ease of analysis, the causes students provided will be classified into several groups. Strictly speaking, according to the respondents, there are two essential kinds of factors that resulted in *Megxit*: external and internal. The former are reflected in the fact that the couple were under great pressure that they could no longer endure, coming from multiple outside sources and due to various reasons. Three such external sources of trouble were identified by the students: the media, the Royal family, and society in general (at times narrowed to the fans of the Royal family or more specifically to those of Kate Middleton). The two main reasons for problems that are most often named are Meghan's biracial identity and her not being royal or at least a member of high society. The internal factors can be interpreted either as the couple's lack of willingness to keep bearing the stress of duties or their feeling burdened by a lack of freedom, as they wanted to gain independence and lead a normal life.

Pressure

Most students consider that the reason for *Megxit* was pressure which the couple – to be more precise, Meghan – could no longer endure, either coming from the media or from their responsibilities as royals. This is how the respondents formulated their answers in that group, starting with pressure caused by media and then pressure due to royal duties:

- Meghan wasn't able to deal with the scrutiny of the media
- she received a lot of backlash and criticism, especially by the media in Britain
- Meghan did not expect that level of media attention and wanted more privacy for her family
- Negative comments, discrimination
- Pressure of the media (criticising Meghan for everything), whom Harry blamed for Diana's death – he didn't want Meghan to feel like his mother felt
- The media would always try to crucify his [Harry's] mother, in kind of a same way they are doing that to Meghan
- Meghan didn't really know what being a royalty meant and the disadvantages of it
- Meghan didn't want to comply to too many strict rules the royal family is expected to live by
- Meghan was born a 'regular' person and couldn't endure living in the 'royal' way
- They couldn't stand the pressure and responsibility that come with being royal
- They couldn't stand the pressure of upholding the image expected of them

- They could no longer take the pressure (Meghan is not royalty and could not handle it)
- They want to live without pressure from the Crown

In his memoir *Spare* Prince Harry underscores many times the pressure he and the entire Royal family suffered from "the press's prying eyes" (77) – especially 'the paps', as he calls the dreaded paparazzi: "The paps were such a problem for Mummy, for everyone, it didn't need to be said" (24). This fear turns into a real phobia for the little boy after his mother's death, which he cannot accept, but ascribes it to the press, who he feels will also seal his destiny like that of his mother: "my first intimation that, after torturing my mother and sending her into hiding, they would soon be coming for me" (45).

The genuine, underlying cause for *Megxit* that is mentioned by several respondents is Meghan's unjust treatment by both the media and individuals – be it fans of the Royal family or unnamed sources, due to her ethnic or non-royal origin. Such opinions are formulated in these ways (*italic* is used when Meghan's origin is explicitly mentioned):

- While Meghan was immensely popular and supported by many [in the US], she received a lot of backlash and criticism, especially by the media in Britain
- Discrimination in media
- Many fans of the Royal family put her down while Kate Middleton was praised (being that Meghan is a *half-black* woman marrying into a white family)
- *Racism* Meghan faced
- Difficulties with media (who treated Meghan different than Kate Middleton and based their opinions on her *race* and that she's *not a royal or a member of a higher society*)
- Meghan is *not royalty* and could not handle it
- Meghan *did not come from a royal family*
- Royal family and British society didn't accept their marriage due to *the social difference*
- *The social ridicule* Meghan Markle faced
- Harassment of Meghan
- To disassociate from the toxic traditions of the royal family

Racism allegations have indeed been referred to several times since the event, for instance in March 2021 during Meghan and Harry's interview with Oprah Winfrey, in which the show host openly mentions 'racist abuse' and Meghan talks about 'racist propaganda' (*The Sun* 2024), or in November 2023 when "Two royal family members appear to have been named as the "royal racists" in the Dutch translation of Omid Scobie's new book *Endgame*" (Sachdeva 2023).

Independence and Freedom

The second cause for *Megxit* underlined by the respondents is independence and freedom the couple wanted to gain both for themselves and for their children. These are the answers in this group:

- Lack of independence and freedom
- They wanted to live a free life
- Independence of their own family
- They want to live and raise children alone
- Going against old traditions
- Younger generation vs. traditionalist views of Royal family

- Meghan enjoyed freedom before so the strict rules and regulations which she was expected to follow became too much of a burden to her

Several students named the specific source of the couple's lack of freedom (the source italicized):

- Seeking freedom from *Royal family*
- They [...] decided to break free from the rules of *the Royal family*
- Not to be controlled by *the Crown*
- They did not want to be controlled by *the Queen*

Freedom – and the lack of it – are certainly among the crucial topics in Harry's book *Spare*. For instance, when they heard the news of Diana's death, it occurred to him that: "*Mummy isn't dead! She's hiding! [...] She had no choice. It was her only hope of freedom*" (26, italic in the source text). When he grew up, the same aspiration for freedom pervaded him: "I thought: How beautiful. So much peace in the wider world ... for some. For those free to search for it" (75).

Some students underlined that gaining independence and freedom meant attaining ordinary/normal way of living:

- They wanted to have an ordinary life (not royal)
- They wanted to have an ordinary life without strict rules
- Normal life without strict rules in the Royal family
- Archie to have normal life without paparazzi

One respondent thought the reason was reciprocal dislike, and explained it simply as:

- Meghan doesn't like England
- Royal family doesn't like Meghan

Only a few respondents gave vague answers that could not be classified, such as:

- The Family has weakened through time
- Some relationships in Royal family
- Some personal problems inside the Royal family
- (Not surprised) considering the trend of similar occurrences in royal families across Europe
- Fundamental differences in culture, upbringing and personal values and priorities

Meghan or Harry?

As mentioned previously, the couple's decision is generally blamed on Meghan and this is also the opinion of our students. There is a single respondent who considers that *Megxit* was caused by Harry:

- Harry has proven to be rebellious throughout his life, now he challenged the establishment

Several students did mention that he wanted to protect his family, but that can also be interpreted as having Meghan in the focus of the decision. In all the other answers in which Harry figures, Meghan is still obviously the main reason because she suffered both physically and mentally, and these respondents specifically draw a parallel between Meghan and Harry's late mother Diana, as can be seen below:

- Very wise decision by a man who loves his wife and cares about her *mental* health

- Harry wanted to be supportive of his wife if the hectic life in Royal family was taking a toll on her physically and *mentally*
- Harry is obviously madly in love with Meghan, so he decided to take this step
- Pressure of the media whom Harry blamed for Diana's death – didn't want Meghan to feel like his mother felt
- Harry remembered what happened to Diana (who also had problems with adjusting) and didn't want Meghan to end up like Diana
- Meghan's *suffering* in the royal family reminded Harry of the similar way his mother had been treated when he was a kid. He didn't want his wife to end up the same way [...] to prevent possible tragic events
- What Harry saw was history repeating itself and I applaud him for making a decision which he felt was best and would keep his family safe
- Harry wanted to stand by his wife so their children grow up with a mother, unlike him
- Harry wanted to shield his family from the media (wanting to crucify Meghan same like his mother)
- Meghan suffering in the Royal family reminded him of Diana

The fact that there are few personal comments (actually, only three of these have been found: they are brave; wise decision; I applaud Harry who wanted to keep his family safe) testifies to the wish of all respondents to try and remain objective, unbiased and to avoid passing any judgment on the couple regarding their decision.

Conclusion

This paper is a case study based on the survey carried out with third-year students at the English Department of Belgrade University's Faculty of Philology. The participants were asked to name the reasons they personally thought were behind the decision made by the Sussexes, Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, just a month before that, to leave the United Kingdom and lead an independent life on their own. As the main cause for this decision, the respondents named pressure coming from the media, the Royal family, and society in general. The second cause regards the couple's wish to become free and live an ordinary life away from the pressure and royal duties.

After four years, their premises have been confirmed by the sources listed in the Introduction of this paper. The most reliable source of information, however, is undoubtedly what the main participants of *Megxit* said themselves, namely, their interview with Oprah and Harry's book *Spare*. In both of these we can find confirmation for the views of the respondents regarding the pressure, racism, and a lack of freedom due to strict rules of the British Royal family – as it was underscored in the previous part of the paper.

Furthermore, it is extremely interesting that almost all of the reasons respondents provided concern either Meghan alone or, much more rarely, the Sussexes as a couple, whereas only one respondent considered that Harry was responsible for the decision. Coupled with the above-mentioned fact that *Megxit* was named after HER and not HIM, this shows that our students are of the same opinion as the media and general public – that *Megxit* was probably caused by Meghan for the most part, while Harry had a less significant, so to say supporting or supportive role in the event.

Therefore, it can be concluded that this analysis has proven that third-year students at the English Department of Belgrade University's Faculty of Philology have mastered the topics

covered by their British Studies curricula sufficiently enough to provide reasonable and plausible causes for *Megxit*.

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