

Brexit: A Decade-Long Journey (2016–2026)

Introduction: A Story Still Unfolding

Brexit – the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union – has been one of the most consequential political events in modern British history. What began as a referendum in 2016 has evolved into a decade-long process of political upheaval, economic adjustment, and cultural reflection.

Ten years on, Brexit is no longer a single event but an ongoing reality. Its consequences continue to shape Britain’s economy, politics, and place in the world. And increasingly, it is shaping a new question: not just why Britain left, but what comes next.

Before the Referendum: A Gamble Takes Shape

The roots of Brexit stretch back decades, but by the early 2010s, tensions over the UK’s relationship with the European Union had intensified.

Under pressure from Eurosceptic MPs and the rise of UKIP, Prime Minister David Cameron promised a referendum on EU membership. Confident that voters would choose to remain, he renegotiated aspects of the UK’s membership and scheduled the vote for June 2016.

Instead of settling the issue, the decision opened the door to a period of profound political and social division.

The 2016 Referendum: Division and Decision

The referendum campaign was one of the most divisive in modern British history.

The Leave campaign focused on sovereignty, immigration, and the slogan “Take Back Control.” The Remain campaign emphasised economic stability and international cooperation.

Media coverage was highly partisan, and social media played a significant role in shaping public opinion.

On June 23, 2016, the UK voted 52% to 48% to leave the European Union.

The result revealed deep divisions across regions, age groups, and political identities—and marked the beginning of a political era defined by Brexit.

After the Vote: Political Turmoil (2016–2019)

Theresa May became Prime Minister in 2016 and triggered Article 50 in March 2017, beginning the formal process of withdrawal.

Her government negotiated a deal with the EU, but it was rejected three times by Parliament. The country became locked in a prolonged political deadlock.

Mass demonstrations took place, particularly from those calling for a second referendum, while pro-Brexit campaigners expressed growing frustration at delays.

In 2019, May resigned.

Boris Johnson succeeded her, campaigning on a promise to “Get Brexit Done.” After winning a decisive general election, he passed his withdrawal agreement.

The UK formally left the European Union on January 31, 2020.

Brexit in Practice: Implementation and Adjustment (2020–2024)

Following departure, the UK entered a transition period before finalising its future relationship with the EU.

The Trade and Cooperation Agreement, agreed at the end of 2020, ensured tariff-free trade in goods but introduced new barriers, including customs checks and regulatory requirements.

The COVID-19 pandemic complicated the immediate picture, but as conditions stabilised, several trends became clear.

UK goods exports to the EU have remained significantly below their pre-Brexit trajectory, with estimates suggesting they are around **15–20% lower than they would have been without Brexit**. At the same time, businesses have faced a sharp rise in bureaucracy, with some estimates putting the cost of additional trade paperwork at **billions of pounds per year**.

Labour shortages also emerged in sectors previously reliant on EU workers, including agriculture, hospitality, and logistics.

Official long-term projections from the UK government indicate that Brexit is expected to leave the economy around **4% smaller over time** than it would have been if the UK had remained in the EU.

Brexit, in short, became not just a political shift—but a structural economic change.

Northern Ireland and the Windsor Framework

One of the most sensitive issues was Northern Ireland.

To avoid a hard border with the Republic of Ireland, new arrangements placed regulatory checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This created both political tension and practical difficulties for businesses.

In 2023, the UK and EU agreed to the Windsor Framework, which reduced checks on many goods and simplified trade flows.

While not resolving all tensions, it marked a significant step toward stabilising relations and reducing disruption.

Political Upheaval at Home

Brexit reshaped British politics in dramatic ways.

After Boris Johnson's resignation in 2022, Liz Truss briefly became Prime Minister but lasted just 45 days after her economic policies triggered severe market instability, including a sharp fall in the pound and rising borrowing costs.

Rishi Sunak succeeded her, focusing on restoring stability and improving relations with the EU.

In 2024, the Labour Party under Keir Starmer won a general election. The new government committed to resetting relations with Europe while ruling out rejoining the EU, the single market, or free movement in the short term.

By the mid-2020s, Brexit had faded from daily political crisis—but not from national life.

The Economic Picture

A decade on, the economic effects of Brexit are clearer.

Trade with the EU remains lower than expected, and UK trade intensity overall has declined compared to similar economies. Business investment has also lagged behind comparable countries since the referendum period.

The Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that Brexit will reduce the UK's long-run productivity and trade openness, contributing to slower economic growth over time.

At the same time, while the UK has secured new trade agreements globally, most analyses suggest these deals are relatively small compared to the scale of lost trade with the EU.

The result is a mixed picture—but one in which the economic costs are now widely acknowledged across much of the political spectrum.

The World's View: From Shock to Adjustment

Brexit was initially met with shock across the world, with financial markets reacting sharply. The pound fell to its lowest level in decades immediately after the referendum.

However, Brexit did not trigger the wave of EU exits that some had predicted. Instead, support for EU membership rose in many countries.

Over time, the UK and EU have settled into a more stable relationship, cooperating on major global issues including security and foreign policy.

2025–2026: A New Phase of Alignment

By 2025 and into 2026, Brexit has entered a quieter but more consequential phase.

The UK government has begun pursuing closer alignment with EU rules in areas such as food standards, environmental regulation, and industrial policy.

This shift is driven largely by economic considerations. Reducing regulatory divergence is seen as a way to ease trade friction and support business.

Some of these changes are expected to be implemented through secondary legislation, allowing ministers to update regulations without full parliamentary debate on each individual rule change, while broader frameworks still require parliamentary approval.

This reflects a significant shift: from divergence as a goal, toward alignment as a practical necessity.

A Shift in Political Pressure

Political pressure for closer ties is also growing.

London Mayor Sadiq Khan has described rejoining the European Union as a long-term goal, arguing that it would benefit the UK economically.

Pro-European campaign groups continue to organise large-scale events and national marches, maintaining visible public pressure.

The Green Party, which supports rejoining the EU, has continued to gain attention and electoral traction, reflecting a broader appetite among some voters for a clearer pro-European stance.

While no major party has adopted rejoining as policy, the range and visibility of pro-EU voices have expanded significantly.

Europe and the World: A Changing Tone

Internationally, the tone toward Brexit has softened.

In public remarks, some European and global political figures have suggested that closer UK–EU cooperation—or even eventual rejoining—would be beneficial, particularly in the context of economic resilience and security challenges.

This reflects a broader shift in perspective: Brexit is increasingly viewed not just as a national decision, but as part of a wider European story.

Public Opinion: From Division to “Bregret”

Public opinion has shifted dramatically since 2016.

By 2026:

- Around **55–60% of voters now say Brexit was the wrong decision**
- Only around **30–35% believe it was right**
- Support for rejoining the EU has become the **most popular long-term option in multiple polls**

This represents a major reversal from the immediate post-referendum years.

Younger voters in particular are overwhelmingly pro-European, suggesting this trend may strengthen over time.

The Rejoin Debate: Momentum, Not Certainty

A decade after the referendum, the idea of rejoining the European Union has moved firmly into mainstream debate.

It is supported by campaign groups, sections of the public, and an increasing number of political voices.

However, this momentum does not yet amount to inevitability. What has changed is not the difficulty—but the direction of travel.

Conclusion: A Story Still in Motion

Ten years on, Brexit does not look like an endpoint.

It looks like a turning point.

The UK has left the European Union, but remains deeply connected to it. Since 2016, the country has moved from division, through disruption, toward a more pragmatic phase of adjustment.

Now, a new dynamic is emerging.

A growing share of the public believes Brexit was a mistake. Political voices calling for closer ties are becoming more prominent. And policy itself is beginning to move toward alignment.

The debate has changed, it is no longer about leaving.
It is about how close the UK chooses to come back.