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10 YEARS AFTER THE BREXIT REFERENDUM: WHAT PUBLIC OPINION REVEALS ABOUT EU–UK RELATIONS

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BertelsmannStiftung

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Title: 10 Years After The Brexit Referendum: What Public Opinion Reveals About EU–UK Relations
Authors: Florian Kommer, Jake Benford and Daniela Schmidt
Proofreading: Goodspell
Design and typesetting: Guidesign

© Fundação Francisco Manuel dos Santos, Florian Kommer, Jake Benford and Daniela Schmidt
October 2026

ISBN: 978-989-9270-26-8

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ABSTRACT

Ten years ago, Britain decided to leave the European Union. The Brexit referendum sent shockwaves across the continent. A decade later, the United Kingdom, the European Union and the wider world have all changed profoundly. Against this backdrop, the Bertelsmann Stiftung presents public opinion data collected over the past ten years. The findings reveal five key insights into the past, present and future of EU–UK relations:

– A domino effect that never came.
In March 2026, only 21% of Britons and 18% of EU citizens believe that other member states will follow Britain's example and leave the EU — less than half the share recorded in 2018.
– A decade for Remain.
Asked how they would vote in an EU membership referendum, more than 50% of Britons have consistently said over the past ten years that they would vote to stay. In March 2026, support for Remain stands at 57%.
– From optimism to disillusionment.
Early Brexit optimism has collapsed. Over the past decade, positive sentiment in the UK across four key indicators — personal outlook, economic situation, the direction of the country and satisfaction with democracy — has declined sharply, with falls ranging from 14 to 27 percentage points.
– Parallel paths.
Brexit has not created a lasting psychological divide between British and European public opinion. Ten years on, Britons and continental Europeans increasingly share common expectations and concerns when thinking about Europe and its future.
– Pragmatic Europeanism.
Europeans on both sides of the Channel distinguish between deeper political integration and European cooperation. While support for further integration has weakened, support for EU membership, confidence in the Union's future and backing for a stronger European role in world affairs remain robust.

INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, on 23 June 2016, 51.89% of British voters chose to leave the European Union. The Brexit referendum sent shockwaves across the continent. In its aftermath, debate in continental Europe centred on whether other member states might follow the UK's example and leave the Union. In Britain, the debate shifted to the terms of departure, the country's future relationship with the EU, and Britain's place in the world after Brexit.

A decade later, the United Kingdom, the European Union and the wider world have all changed profoundly.

The years since the referendum have been shaped by a pandemic, war on the European continent, renewed geopolitical rivalry and mounting economic pressures. Yet the UK and the EU are still searching for a new *modus vivendi*.

Against the backdrop of renewed debates about the UK's relationship with Europe, the Bertelsmann Stiftung presents public opinion data collected over the past ten years. The findings reveal five key insights into the past, present and future of EU–UK relations in a changing world.

A DOMINO EFFECT THAT NEVER CAME: THE PROSPECT OF OTHER MEMBER STATES FOLLOWING BRITAIN OUT OF THE EU NOW APPEARS REMOTE

"The EU's finished, the EU's dead," declared leading Brexit campaigner Nigel Farage the day after the referendum. Marine Le Pen called for a "Frexit" referendum, while Geert Wilders demanded a "Nexit" referendum. Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov even claimed that "only Bulgaria, Romania and Greece will remain when the domino effect is set off".

Rather than emboldening Eurosceptic movements across the continent, Brexit exposed many of the disadvantages of leaving the EU.

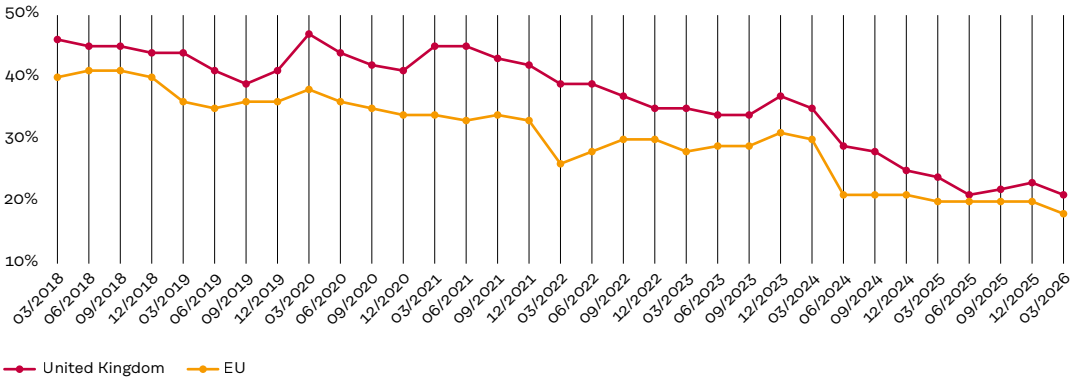
Indeed, in March 2018, as many as 46% of Britons believed that some member states would follow Britain's example and leave the EU. Some 40% of EU citizens shared this view. By March 2026, however, only 21% of Britons and 18% of EU citizens still hold this belief — in both cases, less than half the 2018 figure.

Fears of a "domino effect" — whereby the UK's departure would trigger a wave of exits by other member states — never materialised. Since Brexit, no other country has chosen to leave. Moreover, ten years after the referendum, expectations that other member states might follow Britain out of the EU have largely collapsed.

The UK's prolonged and messy exit appears to have served as a cautionary tale. Rather than emboldening Eurosceptic movements across the continent, Brexit exposed many of the disadvantages of leaving the EU. Even right-wing and populist movements across Europe have adjusted their strategy: instead of campaigning to leave the EU, most — with the notable exception of Germany's AfD — have shifted their political goals towards reforming it from within.

Figure 1 What do you think the EU will look like in 10 years' time?

Some member states will follow Britain's example and leave the EU.



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A DECADE FOR REMAIN: OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS, THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A MAJORITY IN FAVOUR OF STAYING IN THE EU

The result of the Brexit referendum was narrow: 52% voted to leave, while 48% voted to remain. Since June 2016, however, such a majority has failed to reappear. Asked how they would vote in a referendum on EU membership, more than 50% of Britons have consistently said they would vote to stay.

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Nonetheless, the figures have been volatile. Between December 2021 and March 2024, support for Remain peaked at more than 60%. This was the period during which Boris Johnson's government

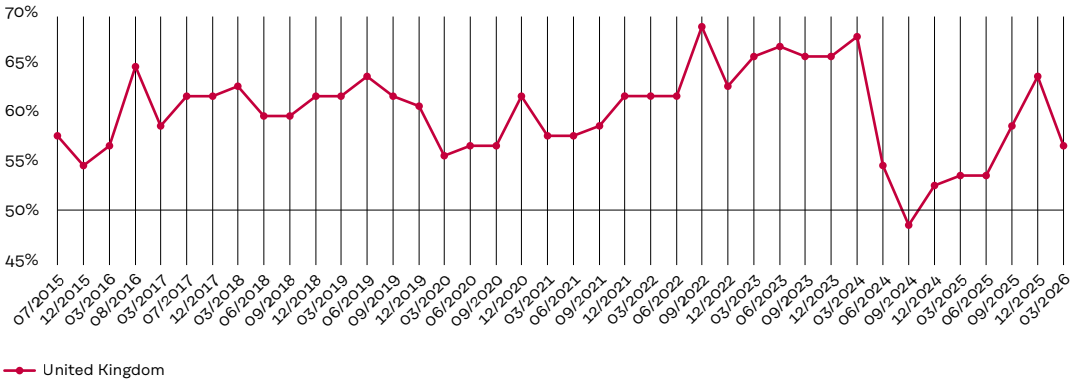
collapsed, Liz Truss became the shortest-serving prime minister in UK history, and Rishi Sunak took office, gradually adopting a more conciliatory approach towards the EU.

It was only from June 2024 to June 2025 that support for Remain hovered marginally above the 50% threshold, with a one-off dip to 49% in September 2024. This was the period during which Labour won a landslide election victory, ending 14 years of Conservative government, and Keir Starmer became Prime Minister. By this point, many Britons may have concluded that being in the EU was unnecessary, as Labour's campaign promise of a "reset" appeared to offer a sufficient alternative.

Since then, support for Remain has recovered. The most recent figures, from March 2026, once again show a stable majority for Remain, at 57%.

Figure 2 Imagine there is a referendum and you could decide whether your country stays as a member of the European Union. How would you vote?

I would vote for my country to stay in the European Union.



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FROM OPTIMISM TO DISILLUSIONMENT: THE POPULIST PROMISE THAT PEOPLE WOULD BE BETTER OFF AFTER BREXIT PROVED FALSE

Shortly after the Brexit referendum, Britons were relatively optimistic about their future outside the EU. In August 2016, 68% said they felt positive about their personal outlook for the future. Some 60% were satisfied with the way democracy worked in the UK, while at least 40% said the country was moving in the right direction. Two years after the referendum, 44% said their economic situation had actually improved over the previous two years.

A decade later, this early Brexit optimism has collapsed. In March 2026, only 41% of Britons say they feel positive about their personal outlook for the future — a decline of 27 percentage points. Just 46% are satisfied with the way democracy works in the UK, down 14 percentage points. Only 25% say that things in the country are moving in the right direction — a drop of 15 percentage points. And just 23% say their economic situation has improved over the previous two years, down 21 percentage points. Overall, early Brexit optimism gave way to a wave of pessimism in the UK.

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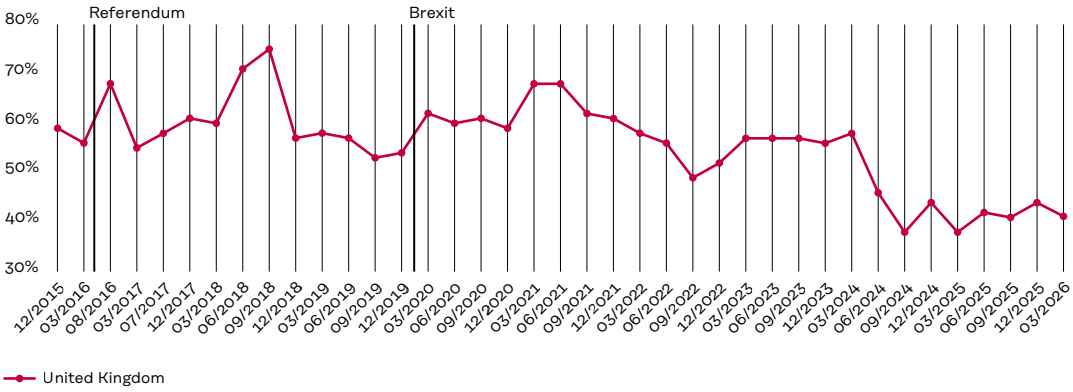
However, it would be wrong to attribute British pessimism solely to Brexit. Dissatisfaction in the United Kingdom runs much deeper — and the UK is not alone in this regard. In August 2016, 56% of EU citizens said they felt positive about their personal outlook; by March 2026, that figure has fallen to 45% — a decline of 11 percentage points. Likewise, by March 2026, only 29% say their economic situation has improved, down 5 percentage points compared with August 2016.

That said, over the past ten years, satisfaction with democracy in one's country among EU citizens has increased by 6 percentage points. Similarly, compared with 2016, the share of people who believe their country is moving in the right direction is 10 percentage points higher in 2026.

Taken together, these trends suggest that continental Europeans have become more pessimistic about their personal circumstances without losing further confidence in their political systems. In the UK, by contrast, declining optimism has been accompanied by growing dissatisfaction with both democracy and the country's direction. The result is a markedly broader sense of disillusionment in Britain than in the EU on average.

Figure 3 In general, what is your personal outlook on the future? Positive or negative?

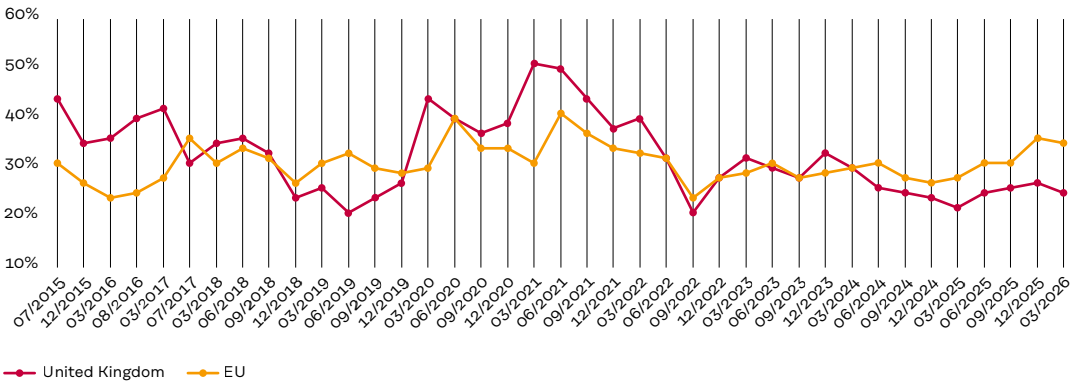
Positive.



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Figure 4 Think about your country in general. Would you say that things are currently moving in the right direction?

Yes, things are moving in the right direction.



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PARALLEL PATHS: BREXIT DID NOT PRODUCE LONG-TERM DIVERGENCE IN PUBLIC SENTIMENT

Did Brexit fundamentally change how Britons and continental Europeans view Europe and its future? The data suggest less divergence than many expected.

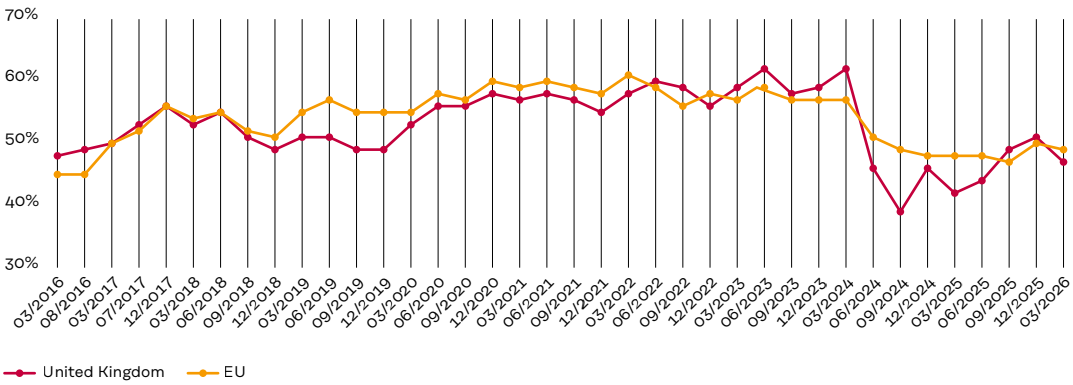
Across a wide range of questions, British and continental public opinion increasingly reacted in parallel to major political, economic and geopolitical developments rather than moving in opposite directions.

This is particularly visible in perceptions of the EU itself. Over the past decade, UK and EU attitudes towards whether the EU is moving in the right direction rose during the post-pandemic period, fell sharply after 2023 and recovered only partially thereafter. A comparable dynamic can be observed in satisfaction with democracy in the European Union, where British and continental attitudes evolved closely despite the UK's departure. The same broad pattern is visible in positive sentiment towards discussing the EU with friends and in support for a stronger EU role in world affairs.

As a result, attitudes on several key questions remain remarkably close. By March 2026, support for a stronger EU role in world affairs stands at 66% in the UK and 71% across the EU. Around half of both Britons and EU citizens said they would speak positively about the EU with friends or colleagues. Likewise, 47% of Britons and 49% of EU citizens were satisfied with the way democracy works in the European Union, both figures having declined from considerably higher levels recorded up to March 2024. The share of respondents who believed that the EU is moving in the right direction is also almost identical: 35% of Britons and 36% of EU citizens agree with this statement in March 2026.

Figure 5 How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the European Union?

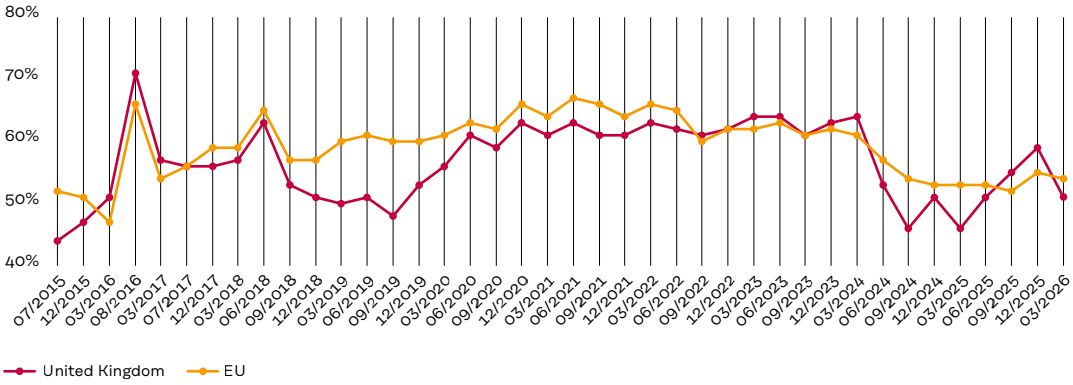
Satisfied.



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Figure 6 Imagine you talk with a friend or colleague about the European Union. Would your conversation be:

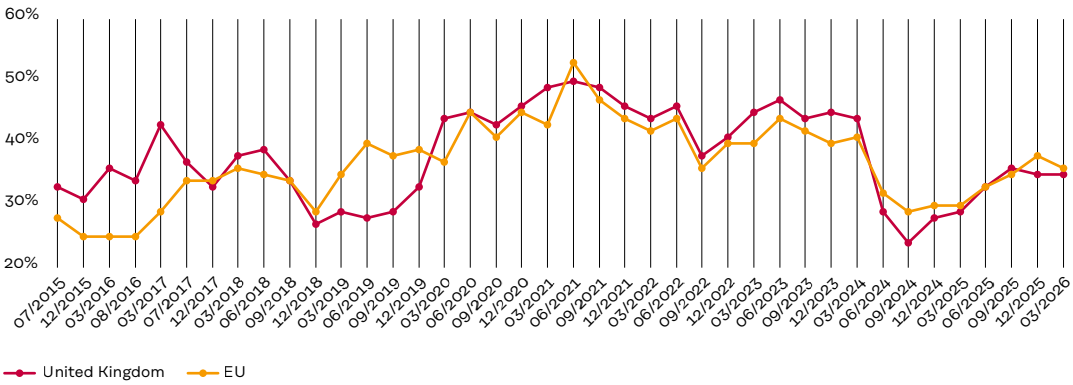
Positive.



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Figure 7 Think about the European Union in general. Would you say that things are currently moving in the right direction?

Yes, things are moving in the right direction.



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These figures suggest that Brexit has not created a lasting psychological separation between British and European public opinion. Ten years on, Britons and continental Europeans increasingly appear to share common expectations and concerns when asked to reflect on Europe and its future — even as they continue to differ on questions of European integration. This is particularly relevant at a time when the EU and the UK are seeking to build a new strategic partnership.

PRAGMATIC EUROPEANISM: THE UK AND CONTINENTAL EUROPE DISTINGUISH BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND STRATEGIC COOPERATION

Brexit was often presented as a rejection of European integration. Yet ten years later, a substantial majority in the UK continues to support a stronger role for the EU in world affairs. This points to an important distinction running throughout the data: support for deeper European integration is not necessarily the same as support for European cooperation.

Across the decade, support for deeper political and economic integration remained relatively limited in the United Kingdom. For most of the period, only a little over a third of Britons agreed that Europe needed more political and economic integration. Support increased markedly between 2020 and 2023, briefly reaching 50% — possibly reflecting the combined effects of the pandemic, renewed geopolitical tensions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and a broader reassessment of European cooperation after Brexit — before falling back to 33% by March 2026. Across the EU, support for integration was generally higher than in the UK, but it too declined substantially in recent years.

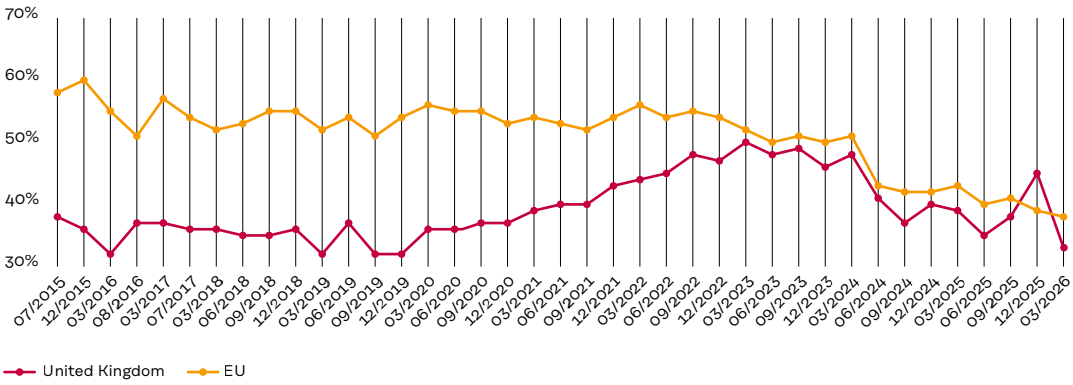
By contrast, British support for EU membership remained consistently stronger, ranging between 55% and 69% over the past decade. Confidence in the EU's long-term survival was stronger still: throughout the period, only 8–16% of respondents in the EU and 10–22% in the UK believed that the Union would cease to exist within the next ten years. Support for a stronger EU role in world affairs remained highest of all, staying at or above 60% in both the UK and the EU throughout the decade.

> This points to a form of Europeanism that is less centred on federalist ambitions and more focused on the practical advantages of acting collectively in areas such as security and geopolitics.

Taken together, these findings suggest that many Europeans distinguish between deeper political integration and European cooperation. While support for further integration has weakened in both the UK and the EU, support for EU membership, confidence in the Union's future, and backing for a stronger European role in world affairs have remained comparatively robust. This points to a form of Europeanism that is less centred on federalist ambitions and more focused on the practical advantages of acting collectively in areas such as security and geopolitics.

Figure 8 If you had to choose, which of the following statements best describes your overall attitude towards European integration?

We need more political and economic integration across Europe.



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Comparing Britain not only with the EU average but also with France and Germany reveals another important trend. In several areas, Britain no longer appears to be a uniquely sceptical outlier. Instead, all three major European powers increasingly display similar patterns of low or declining optimism about national politics, economic prospects and Europe's future. In the UK, the share of respondents who believed their country was moving in the right direction fell from around 44% in mid-2015 to 25% in March 2026. In Germany, the figure declined from 35% to 33% during the same period, while in France it remained persistently low, standing at just 25% in 2026. A similar picture emerges with regard to personal economic prospects: the share of Britons reporting an improvement in their economic situation over the previous two years fell from 32% to 23%, com-

pared with a decline from 37% to 29% in Germany, while France remained largely at the lower end of the range. Likewise, in all three countries, fewer than half of respondents believed that the EU was moving in the right direction for most of the decade.

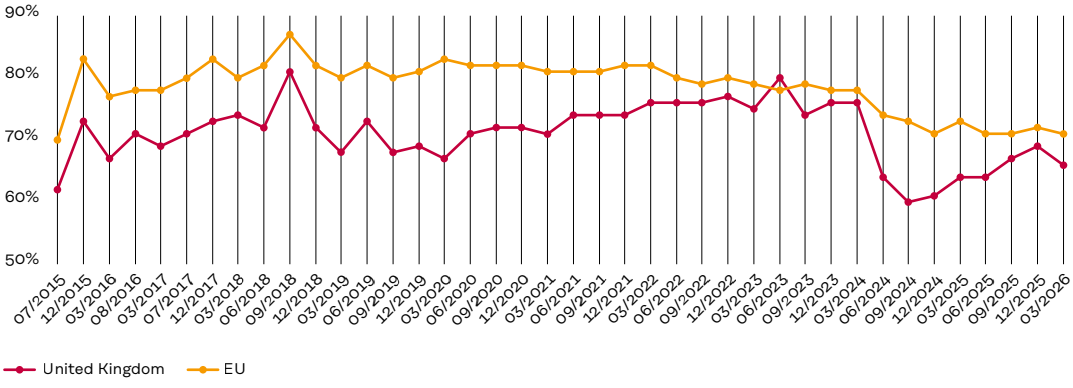
Yet despite these shared concerns, support for European cooperation remains remarkably resilient. Throughout the decade, clear majorities in the UK, Germany and France consistently supported a more active role for the EU in world affairs, with support remaining, almost without exception, above 60% in all three countries.

Throughout the decade, clear majorities in the UK, Germany and France consistently supported a more active role for the EU in world affairs [...]

The key political tensions therefore appear to run within Europe itself rather than simply between Britain and the continent. While the institutional divide created by Brexit remains important, the data suggest that Britain, France and Germany increasingly face similar political and economic pressures while sharing a common interest in European cooperation. The debate about Europe's future may therefore be less about the institutional divide created by Brexit and more about how Europeans respond to shared challenges in an increasingly uncertain world.

Figure 9 Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "The European Union should play a more active role in world affairs."

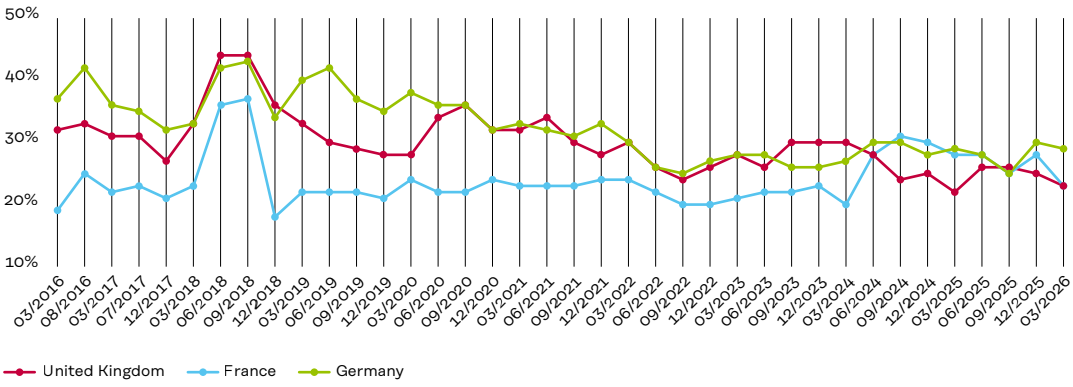
I agree.



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Figure 10 How has your personal economic situation changed in the last two years?

Improved.



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OUTLOOK

Taken together, the findings point to a gradual softening of the political and psychological barriers that have shaped EU–UK relations since Brexit. While Britons remain cautious about deeper European integration, support for EU membership remains resilient, attitudes towards Europe increasingly resemble those found across the continent, and clear majorities continue to favour European cooperation in strategic areas. This does not point to a simple reversal of Brexit, not least because our polling does not examine the internal political and societal divisions that continue to shape opinion on Europe within the United Kingdom. It does, however, suggest growing political space for a more ambitious and pragmatic EU–UK relationship based on shared interests, common challenges and closer cooperation in areas where acting at a European scale increasingly matters — particularly in security and geopolitics.

To view the full data set, please visit the link.

ABOUT EUPINIONS

eupinions is an independent platform dedicated to gathering and analysing data on European public opinion. We provide insights into what Europeans think about current political issues and emerging megatrends. Every quarter, we conduct surveys across all EU member states in 22 languages. Our data are representative of the population with regard to age, gender and country/region. eupinions is a Bertelsmann Stiftung project. The data are collected by Nira Data.

For more information, visit the link.

METHODOLOGY NOTE

The samples analysed in this report were collected by Nira Data (formerly Latana and Dalia Research) across all EU member states and the United Kingdom. The survey covered all 28 EU member states until 2020 and all 27 member states thereafter. The samples reflect national population distributions in terms of age (18–69 years), gender and region/country. To obtain census-representative results, the data were weighted using the most recent Eurostat statistics.

References to cross-country differences in this report are limited to those countries with sufficiently large sample sizes: Belgium (since December 2018), France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands (since December 2019), Poland, Portugal (since December 2024), Spain and the United Kingdom.

The complete eupinions Trends question set, including UK data, together with all visualisations, is available here.

Considering the sample size (an average of 13,200 respondents) and the estimated overall design effect (averaging 1.3), the effective margin of error for EU-wide estimates is approximately ±1.0 percentage point calculated at a 95% confidence level.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Florian Kommer is Senior Expert for European Strategic Issues at the Bertelsmann Stiftung. He previously worked as a diplomat at the German Federal Foreign Office, where he served as Deputy Chief of Staff to the Minister of State for Europe and Climate. Prior to that, he headed the parliamentary office of a Member of the German Bundestag. He also worked for several years at the Heinrich Böll Foundation as Senior Adviser to the President and in the EU/North America and Middle East/North Africa divisions. He completed a traineeship at the European Commission. Florian Kommer studied Politics, Economics and Philosophy in Hamburg, Istanbul and Passau.

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