

# **THE CROSS-CHANNEL RESET: TRUMP, PUTIN, AND SHIFTING EU-UK OPINION**

**Mark Leonard**

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## **SUMMARY**

- Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Trump’s second election win have transformed the context of EU-UK relations, a new poll by ECFR shows. The prevailing public view in Britain and major EU states is that the relationship should become closer.
- On issues ranging from Ukraine to China, Brits are reluctant to follow Trump’s lead. They look more to Europe than to America – not just for their economic future and migration, but also for their security.
- Where leaders on both sides of the English Channel are still sticking to their red lines, voters are more pragmatic. Most continental respondents believe offering the UK better access to the single market is a price worth paying for a closer security partnership. In Britain, a majority of both anti- and pro-Brexit voters support compromises facilitating movement and trade. Both sides have more political room than they realise.
- The British government has a clear opportunity to win back pro-European voters without alienating its decisive “hero voters”, the “red wall” of working-class English seats in the Midlands and north, or Brexit supporters in general.

# The shifting tectonics of EU-UK relations

February 2022 and November 2024 were two successive hammer blows to what remained of the post-Cold War geopolitical order in Europe. If it was not already abundantly clear that the continent has entered a new era, it is now. Voters in the United Kingdom and the European Union grasp this, and are rethinking old geopolitical assumptions. One of the most striking shifts concerns the relationship between the two.

While the British government and the European Commission are edging only slowly towards closer cooperation, public opinion is far ahead of them. That is the central finding of a major new ECFR opinion poll conducted in the weeks immediately after the United States presidential election. Comprising 9,278 respondents across the UK and the EU's five most populous countries, it shows strong support on both sides for an ambitious reset that cuts across many of the red lines that constrained the relationship before Donald Trump's win in November.

A majority of voters in Germany and Poland – and a plurality in France, Italy and Spain – think that the EU should be willing to make economic concessions to the UK to secure a closer security relationship. And in the UK, a majority of voters (including 54 per cent of those who voted for Brexit in 2016) would be willing to accept free movement in exchange for a stronger economic relationship with the EU. Our polling also shows that when it comes to their economic future, tackling migration, and even security, more Brits look to the EU than to the US as their country's most important partner.

The Brexit referendum is now over eight years behind us. When British voters decided to leave the EU, Barack Obama was still in the White House. The UK was enjoying a much-hailed “golden age” in its relations with China. The covid-19 pandemic had not yet struck. And Russian president Vladimir Putin had yet to launch his full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Many Brexiteers hoped that Britain would thrive as a free-wheeling, buccaneering trading nation in a world of ever-more open markets. On the EU side, although most governments were distressed by British voters' decision, quite a few were also quietly relieved to see the back of an often troublesome and reluctant partner.

But our poll shows that in the minds of many voters, we are in a new world. In every country surveyed, the prevailing view is that EU-UK relations should become closer rather than staying the same or becoming more distant. The war in Ukraine, tensions with China, and now a looming second Trump term are forcing continental Europeans and Brits to look at their relationship in a new light. This report charts those poll findings: starting with the overall openness to a reset; then surveying the new pragmatism in Britain and then the EU;

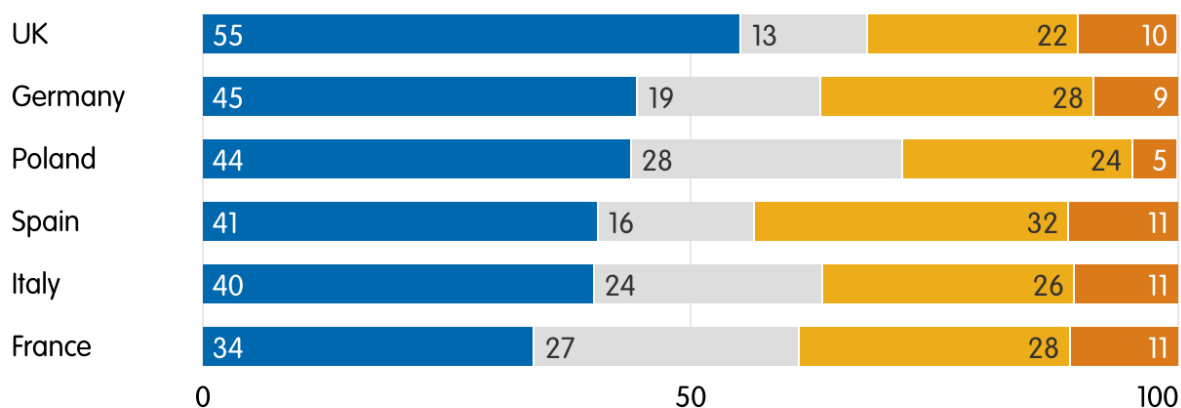
before showing the political breadth of this sentiment in the UK especially. It argues that there is more political room for a bold reset than governments generally realise.

## The feeling's mutual: The new cross-Channel consensus

It would be one thing if the appetite for such a reset were present only on one side of the Channel, or in just one narrow segment of the political spectrum. But our poll finds a strikingly broad consensus both in the UK and in the EU that the time is ripe. In every country polled, the prevailing view is that the relationship should become closer rather than staying the same or becoming more distant.

### Which of the following statements, regarding the EU's future relationship with the UK, best reflects your view? In per cent

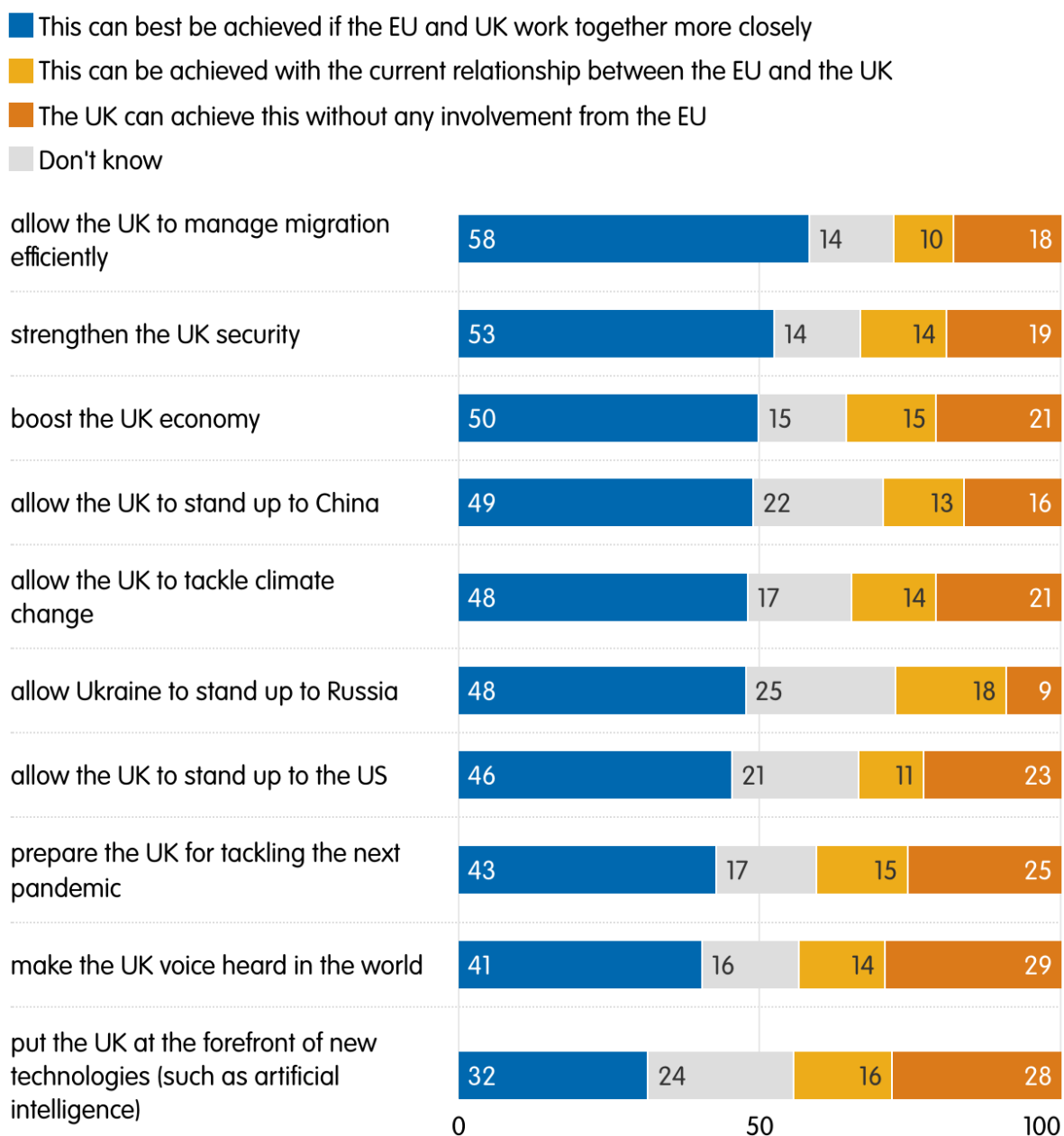
- The UK-EU relationship should become closer
- The current UK-EU relationship should continue
- The UK-EU relationship should become more distant
- Don't know



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
ECFR · ecf.eu

In Britain, a solid majority of 55 per cent agree with this, compared with only 10 per cent who would refer a more distant relationship. And the feeling is mutual. Across the EU, pluralities concur in every country polled. Our data also tell us *why* voters want more cooperation. Around half of Brits believe that this would help the UK to manage migration, strengthen its security, boost its economy, stand up to the US and China, tackle climate change, and allow Ukraine to stand up to Russia.

## UK respondents: What involvement, if any, do you think the UK needs from the EU to achieve each of the following? In per cent



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Working with the EU on these issues enjoys cross-partisan support. This is highest among left-wing and centre-left voters. But many Conservative voters also recognise that the UK would benefit from a closer relationship with the EU. On migration especially, 55 per cent acknowledge the benefits of cooperation. On this, they clearly differ from voters for the hard-

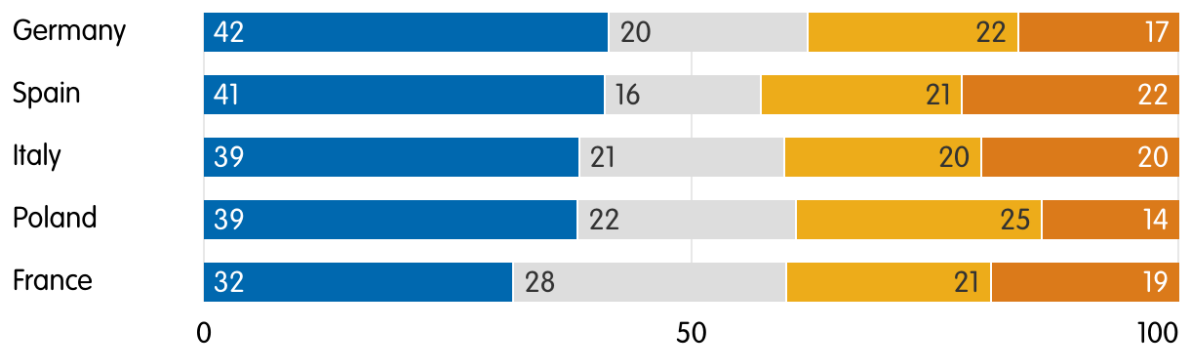
right Reform UK party, half of whom believe the UK can manage migration efficiently without any involvement from the EU. Significant numbers of Conservative voters also believe that closer EU-UK cooperation is the best way to allow Ukraine to stand up to Russia (45 per cent), allow the UK to stand up to China (42 per cent), strengthen the UK's security (39 per cent), and boost its economy (29 per cent).

EU citizens too recognise the importance of working more closely with the UK, especially to strengthen EU security (around 40 per cent in Germany, Italy, Poland, and Spain, though only 32 per cent in France), and to stand up to the US and China. For French respondents, the strongest case for working more closely with Britain concerns migration management; for Italians it is climate change and security.

### What involvement, if any, do you think the EU needs from the UK to achieve each of the following? - Strengthen the European security. In per cent

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- This can best be achieved if the EU and UK work together more closely
- Don't know
- This can be achieved with the current relationship between the EU and the UK
- The EU can achieve this without any involvement from the EU



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxix for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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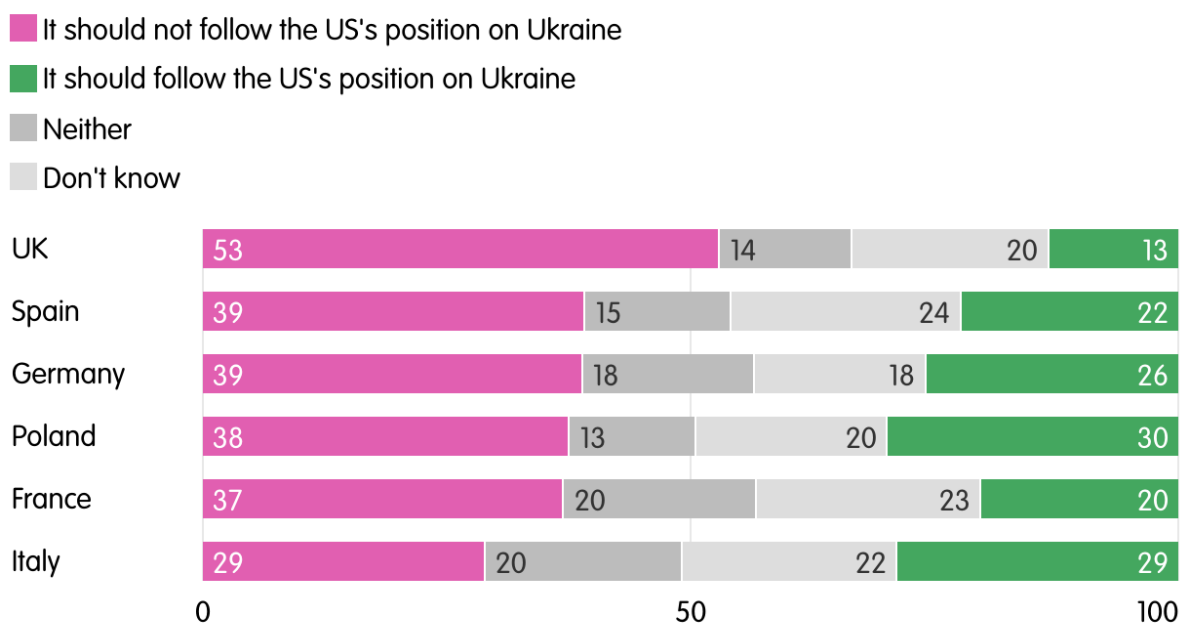
## Trump's transformation of British outlooks: Europe before America

Once Trump takes office, UK prime minister Keir Starmer's government will be eager to avoid being forced into a binary choice

between Europe and America. Similarly, EU countries will do their best to build as constructive a relationship as possible with the new American administration. But if Trump makes good on his campaign promises regarding Ukraine, trade, China, and the Middle East, the UK risks being drawn in competing directions; pulled between the US and the EU. In all these areas, the British public is highly reluctant to follow Trump’s lead.

If Trump were to try to force Ukraine to accept major concessions towards Russia, 53 per cent of Brits believe their government should not follow the US position, while only 13 per cent believe it should. This is broadly aligned with public opinion in all the EU countries polled, where pluralities are of the same opinion.

**Now that Donald Trump is re-elected the president of the US, he might try to force Ukraine to stop fighting and accept major concessions towards Russia. In such a scenario, what do you think the EU/UK should do? In per cent**

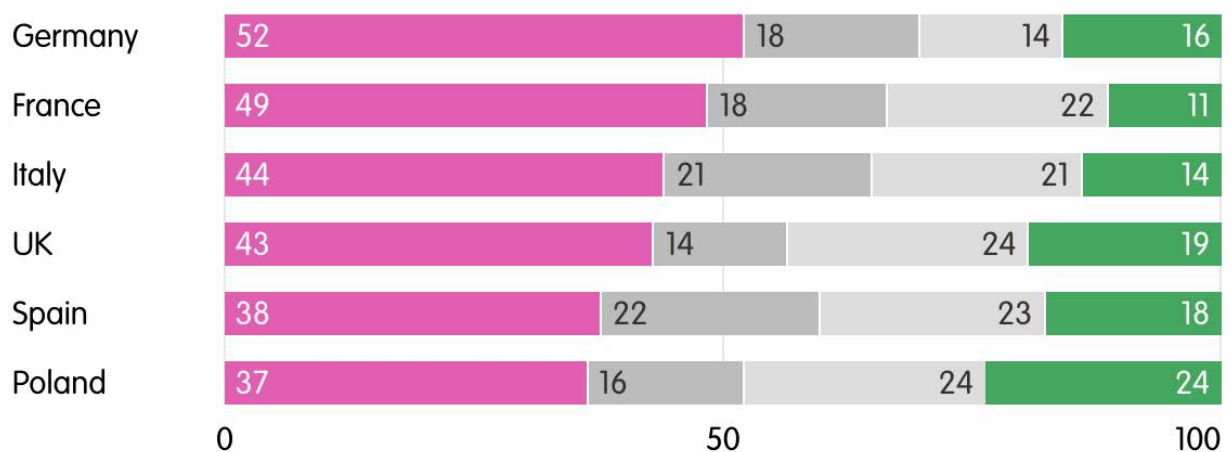


Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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A plurality of Brits and Europeans also believe that Europe should seek to shape its China policy independently from the US, even if that leads to tensions with Washington. Only minorities in these countries (of up to 24 per cent, in Poland) believe the opposite: that Europe should stand firmly on America’s side, even if it leads to tensions with Beijing.

## Which of the following statements, regarding the EU/UK's approach to the relationship between the US and China, best reflects your view? In per cent

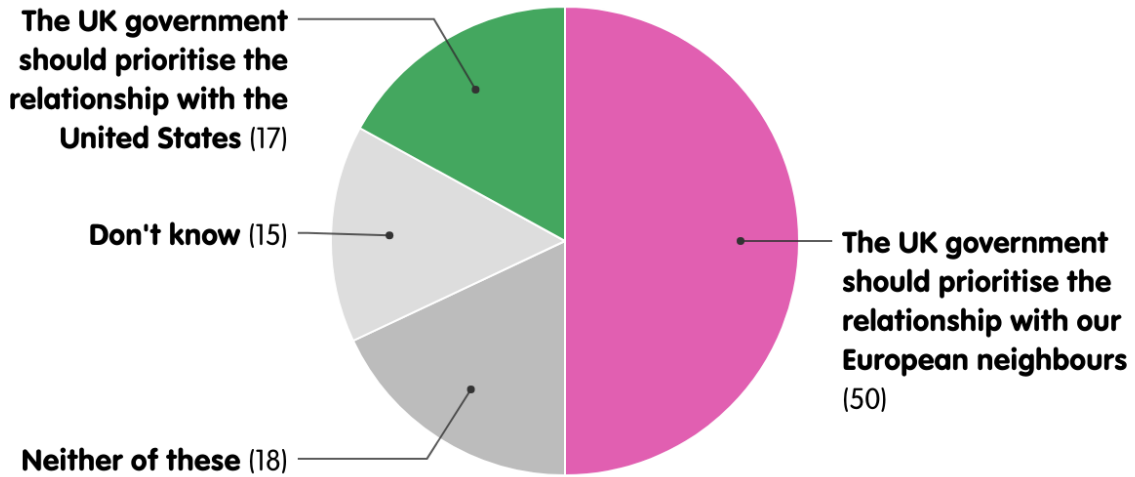
- The EU/UK should seek to shape its China policy independently from the US, even if that leads to tensions in our relations with the US
- The EU/UK should stand firmly on the US's side, even if that leads to tensions in our relations with China
- Neither
- Don't know



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
 ECFR · [ecfr.eu](http://ecfr.eu)

When asked whether the UK government should prioritise relations with the US or with its European neighbours, Brits give a clear answer: 50 per cent choose Europe and only 17 per cent the US. Moreover, when asked to choose between the US, EU countries, and Commonwealth countries as the UK's most important partners for security, jobs, and global influence, Brits choose the EU more often than the US on all three points.

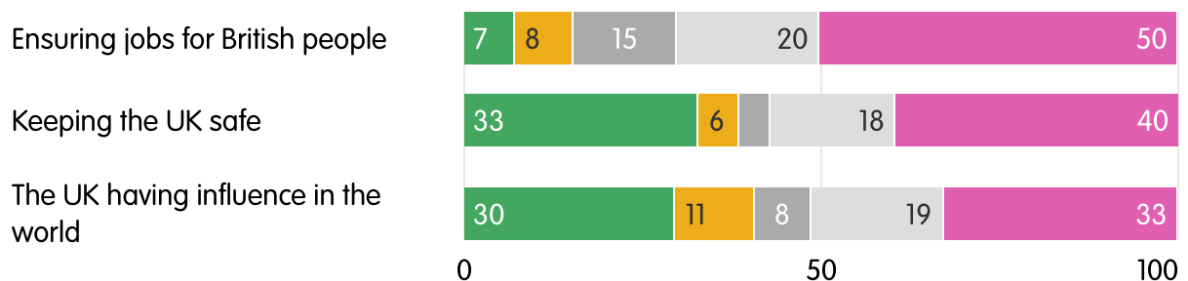
**UK respondents: Which of the following statements best reflects your view?** In per cent



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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**UK respondents: Which relationship do you think is most important for each of the following?** In per cent

- Relationship with the United States
- Relationship with the Commonwealth countries
- Relationship with the European Union countries
- None of these relationships are important
- Don't know



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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On the economy, Brits overwhelmingly recognise that the EU is a more important partner than the US; maybe reflecting the fact that the UK does almost three times as much trade with its European partners than with its American allies. Our polling finds not just a majority among the general British population, but also high numbers among pro-Brexit voters (32 per cent) subscribing to that view. For comparison, only 13 per cent of the latter look primarily to the US to ensure jobs for British people.

On foreign policy, the picture is more mixed. A plurality of 33 per cent of the British public look chiefly to the EU, compared with 30 per who believe the relationship with the US is the most important for the UK to have influence in the world. Most surprising, however, is that in a NATO-first country, more Brits look to Europe than the US on security issues. Whereas 33 per cent believe that the transatlantic relationship is most important for keeping Britain safe, 40 per cent instead believe that the relationship with the EU is more important.

## The Trump effect on the EU: Revisiting “cherry-picking”

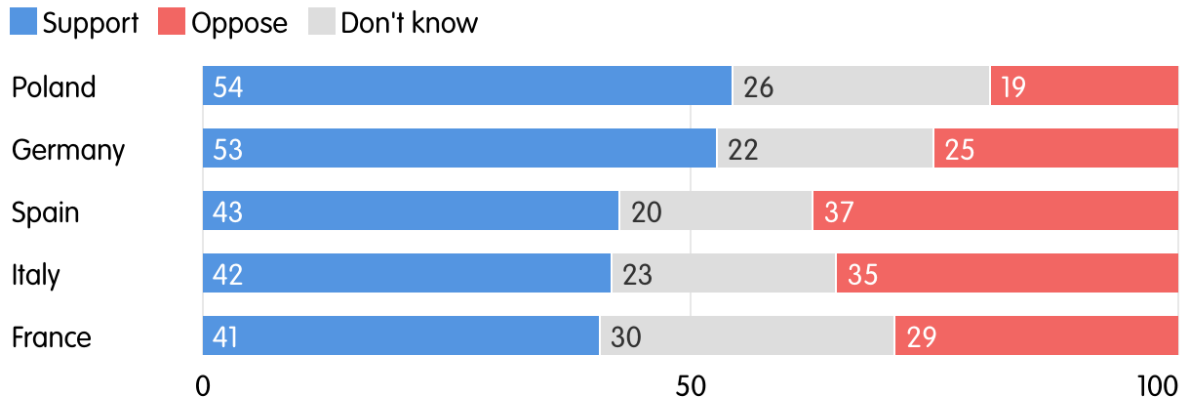
The EU is also bracing for economic and security challenges from the Trump White House. As Ukraine’s odds of victory lengthen and Russia re-arms with a view to possible future aggression, European leaders are re-evaluating their priorities. Defence budgets have been swiftly rising over the 2 per cent of GDP mark in many countries and the European Commission is looking into creative ways to reapportion money towards military uses. Europeans are now preparing to have to defend themselves with less America.

These sorts of challenges tend to refocus minds on what is important, re-ordering priorities among European voters too. Our poll shows that these seem open flexing the red lines of the recent past, particularly where fears of British “cherry-picking” of elements of EU membership are concerned. Majorities in Poland, Spain, Germany, and Italy, and a 47 per cent near-majority in France would now support giving the UK access to the EU’s research programmes in exchange for closer security co-operation. This would build on its return to the EU’s Horizon programme for R&D under the terms of the 2023 Windsor Framework.

But our poll also shows that many EU citizens would be willing to go farther than that. Pluralities in all the EU countries surveyed would even support granting the UK special access to certain parts of the union’s single market to seal a closer security partnership. In Germany and Poland, clear majorities support this position, with 54 per cent in Germany wanting to grant access compared with 19 opposing it, and 53 to 25 in Poland. Even in more sceptical France, 41 per cent support giving the UK access.

**Each of the following are potential UK conditions that the EU may need to agree to for a closer security arrangement with the UK to be reached. To what extent, if at all, would you support or oppose the following conditions? - Granting the UK special access to certain parts of the European single market. In per cent**

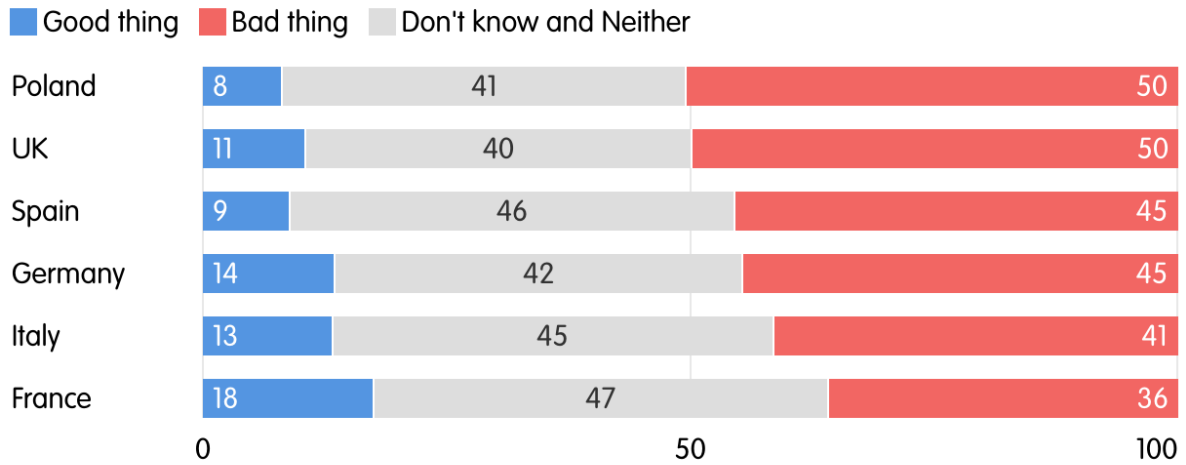
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Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxix for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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These findings are compatible with the fact that the preponderant view in every country we polled is that Brexit was bad for the EU.

## Do you consider the UK leaving the European Union to be good or bad for... the European Union? In per cent



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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It is important to recognise that Brexit and the UK-EU future relationship of course matters more to UK respondents than to citizens of other states. Nonetheless, there is broad permission from European publics to recast relations. Some EU officials and governments may be sceptical about offering the UK special terms, but our poll suggests that continental public opinion is more pragmatic.

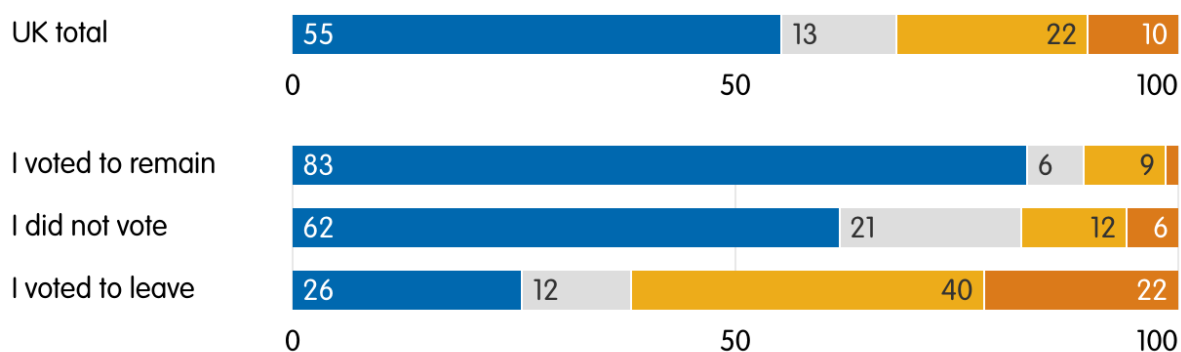
## The Brexit parenthesis: Britain's divisions are healing

The Starmer government has thus far been cautious in its reset with the EU. This is partly because the EU was going through a leadership change when Labour came to power back in July. But it was also motivated by concerns about the views of those voters the party deems crucial to its future electoral success. The government fears re-opening Brexit-era divisions that divided the country and led many voters in traditionally Labour-supporting areas in the English Midlands and north (the so-called “red wall”) to vote for Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party in 2019.

Support for closer cooperation with the EU is, predictably, strongest among those who voted to remain at the referendum in 2016. But those who voted to leave back then do not necessarily want a more distant relationship with the EU now. In fact, 26 per cent of Brexiteers believe the UK and the EU should become closer. And a majority of those who did not vote in 2016 would favour a rapprochement too.

**UK respondents: Which of the following statements, regarding the UK's future relationship with the EU, best reflects your view? By 2016 referendum vote, in per cent**

- The UK-EU relationship should become closer
- The current UK-EU relationship should continue
- The UK-EU relationship should become more distant
- Don't know



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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Some differences persist, of course. Plenty of British voters are tired of the Brexit psychodrama and do not want to reopen it. Only 27 per cent of the British public says that it thinks "very strongly" about whether the EU-UK relationship should become closer, more distant, or stay the same. This relatively low salience is one reason why the new British government wants to focus elsewhere.

**UK respondents: You said that you think the EU-UK relationship should become closer / more distant / stay the same. How strongly, if at all, do you feel about that?** As share of total UK population, in per cent



	Closer	Stay the same	More distant
Very strongly	20	2	5
Fairly strongly	27	11	3
Not very strongly	8	7	1
Not at all strongly	1	1	0
Don't know	1	1	0

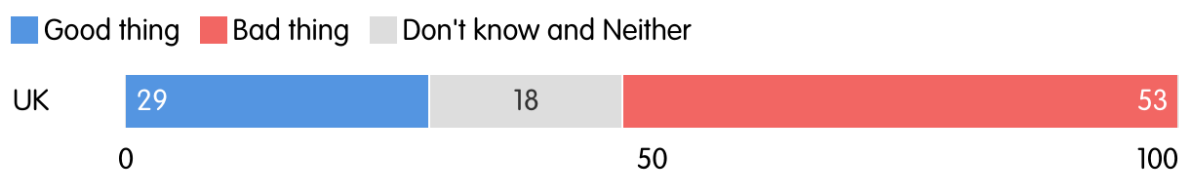
11 per cent of the UK public didn't know whether they would like the EU-UK relations to become closer, more distant, or stay the same.

Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxix for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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But as the security and economic environment becomes more challenging, the case for deeper cooperation with the EU becomes stronger. Moreover, EU-UK relations in Britain remain a salient topic: 47 per cent of the British public feel "very strongly" or "fairly strongly" that the EU-UK relationship should become closer.

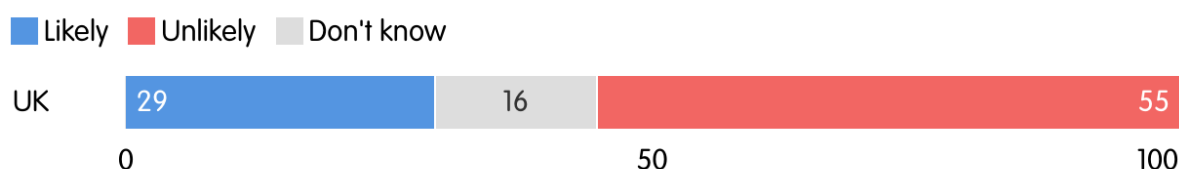
And two further data points show that the British public is getting over the Brexit era divisions. Firstly, although a majority of voters (53 per cent) think Brexit was bad for the UK, few (just 29 per cent) take the view that it will be reversed. And even among those who think Brexit was bad for Britain, the prevailing belief (49 per cent) is that the UK will not return to the EU in the next two decades. That removes some of the toxicity of the original Brexit debate.

## UK respondents: Do you consider the UK leaving the European Union to be good or bad for... the United Kingdom? In per cent



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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## UK respondents: How likely or unlikely do you believe it is for Britain to rejoin the EU in the next 20 years? In per cent



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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Secondly, and most importantly in the British political context, few Brits suspect Starmer of having secret intentions of bringing the UK back into the EU. Just 19 per cent believe the government wants the UK to re-join. A plurality (44 per cent) thinks it is simply seeking a closer cooperation with the EU from the outside. So the British public is likely to look at the elements of any reset on its own merits, rather than as disguised bids to re-join the bloc.

**UK respondents: Based on your own understanding, what do you think the current Labour government's stance is when it comes to UK-EU relations? In per cent**

- The government wants the UK to re-join the EU
- The government wants closer cooperation with the EU – without the need to re-join the EU
- The government wants the post-Brexit relationship with the EU to remain the same
- The government wants a more distant relationship with the EU
- None of these
- Don't know



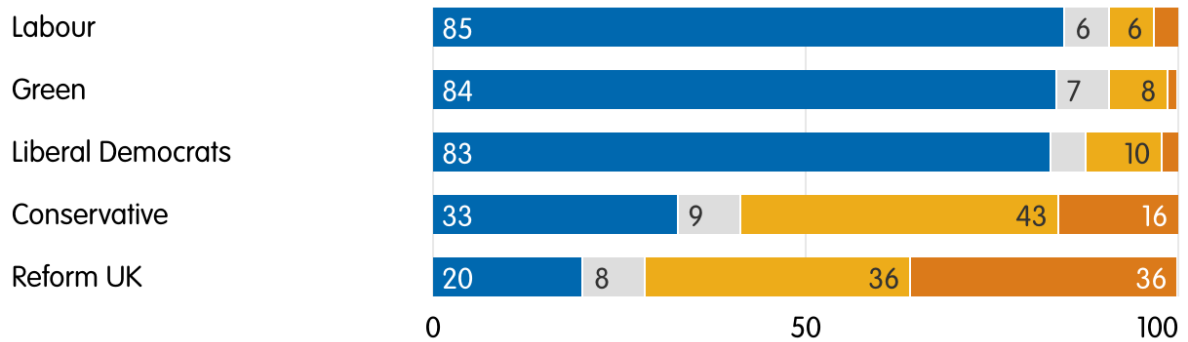
Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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The Labour government is concerned about several electoral groups in particular: the red wall voters it lost at the 2019 election, the so-called “hero” voters who switched to Labour from the Conservatives in July 2024, and voters it has lost since then. Our polling shows that either majorities or pluralities in all three of these groups want a closer relationship with the EU. They also believe that this would be the best way to boost the UK’s economy, manage migration, and ensure the country’s security – and do not suspect the government of seeking to re-join the EU. (They are joined in this thinking by so-called “blue wall” voters, defined as traditionally Conservative but anti-Brexit but voters in affluent parts of southern England.)

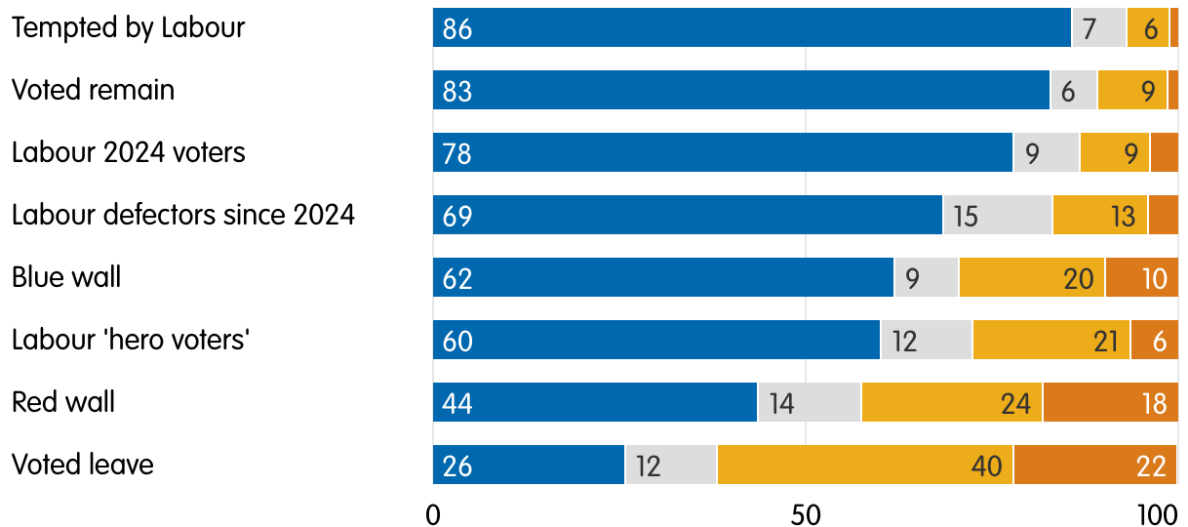
**UK respondents: Which of the following statements, regarding the EU's future relationship with the UK, best reflects your view? In per cent**

- The UK-EU relationship should become closer
- The current UK-EU relationship should continue
- The UK-EU relationship should become more distant
- Don't know

**By voter intention**



**By Labour's key voter segments**



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxix for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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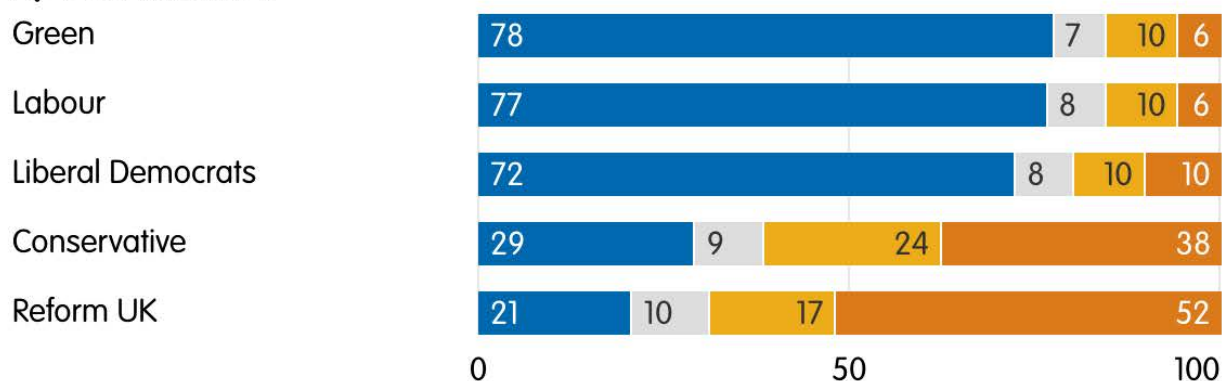


## UK respondents: What involvement, if any, do you think the UK needs from the EU to achieve each of the following? - Boost the UK economy. In per cent

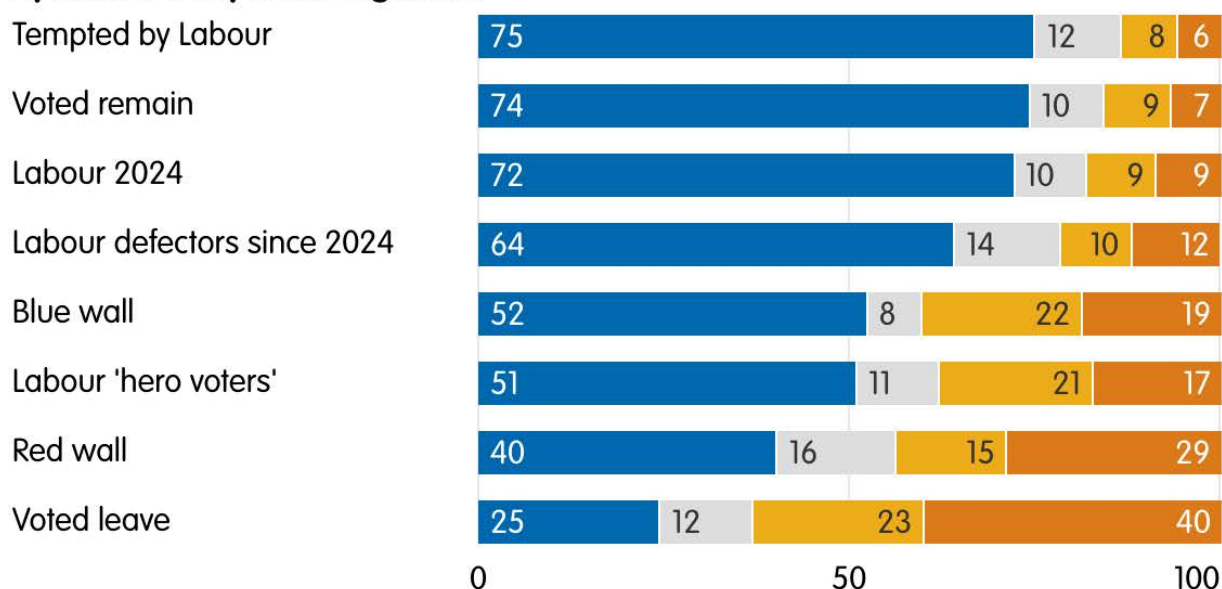
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- This can best be achieved if the EU and UK work together more closely
- This can be achieved with the current relationship between the EU and the UK
- The UK can achieve this without any involvement from the EU
- Don't know

### By voter intention



### By Labour's key voter segments

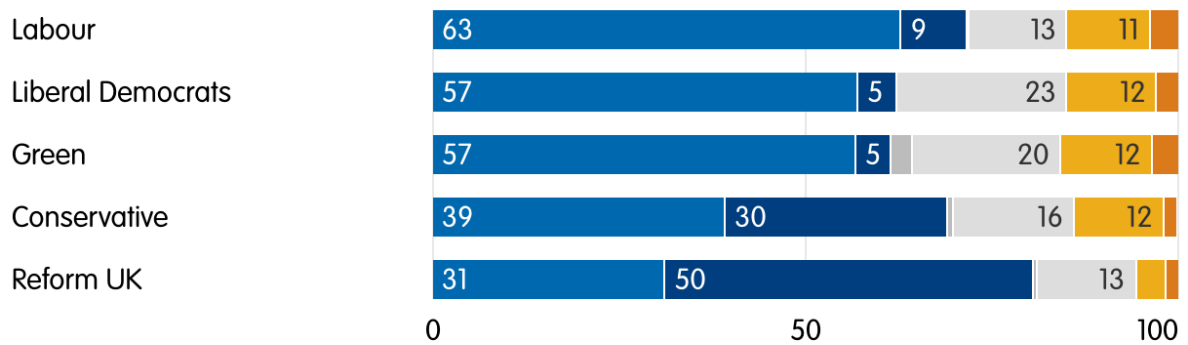


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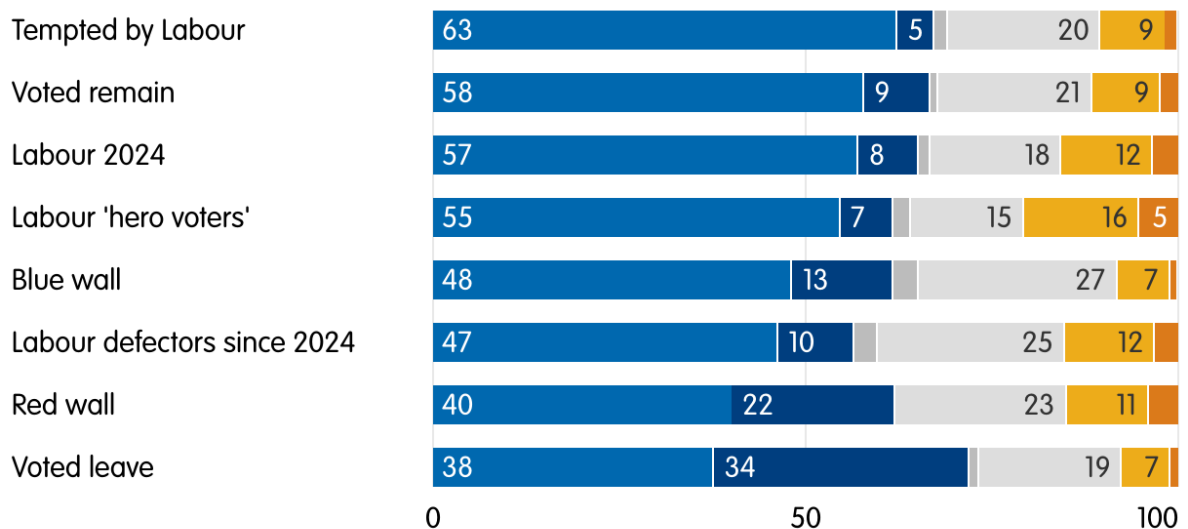
**UK respondents: Based on your own understanding, what do you think the current Labour government's stance is when it comes to UK-EU relations?** In per cent

- The government wants closer cooperation with the EU – without the need to re-join the EU
- The government wants the UK to re-join the EU
- The government wants a more distant relationship with the EU
- The government wants the post-Brexit relationship with the EU to remain the same
- None of these
- Don't know

**By voter intention**



**By Labour's key voter segments**



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Overall, our opinion poll suggests that British citizens are less nervous about engaging in Europe – and less concerned about Starmer’s red lines – than the government is itself. For

example, where Whitehall and Westminster are wary about agreeing a youth mobility scheme with the EU, this initiative finds wide acceptance across the British political spectrum. Almost seven in 10 Brits (including a 55 per cent majority of former pro-Brexit voters) would support a scheme to allow up to 200,000 18–30-year-olds from the UK and the EU to travel, study, live, and work freely in each others’ countries for up to four years. Acceptance is likewise widespread among our continental respondents.

## UK respondents: Support or opposition to four possible youth mobility schemes. In per cent

■ Strongly support 
 ■ Tend to support 
 ■ Tend to oppose 
 ■ Strongly oppose 
 ■ Don't know

Relaxing rules on school visits and exchange schemes so that British children can travel to Europe and European children can come to the UK



Negotiating a deal which would allow British students to go to universities in Europe on the same terms as European students. In exchange, EU students would be offered the same tuition fees as UK students at British universities



Negotiating a deal which would allow all 18-30 year olds in the UK the chance to travel, live and work in European countries. In exchange, all 18-30 year olds from the EU would have the same opportunities in the UK



Negotiating a deal which would allow up to 200,000 18-30 year olds from the UK the chance to study and work in the EU for up to four years. In exchange, up to 200,00 18-30 year olds from the EU would have the same opportunities in the UK



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Asked about possible trade-offs that could be necessary for the UK to gain privileged access to the EU single market, most Brits (51 per cent) would accept adopting the union’s phytosanitary rules on food and product safety. A plurality (41 per cent) would even be willing to allow the European Court of Justice, the EU’s highest court, to decide if British companies are meeting the rules of the market or not. But the most striking finding is that a large

majority (68 per cent) of British respondents claims it would accept the reciprocal opening up of borders, for EU and UK citizens of all ages to travel, live and work freely.

### UK respondents: If the UK could regain special access to the European market, would you or would you not be willing to accept the following conditions? In per cent

■ Would be willing to accept ■ Would not be willing to accept ■ Don't know

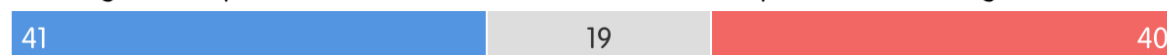
Allowing EU citizens to travel, live and work in the UK – and UK citizens to do the same throughout the EU



Accepting European rules on food safety and product safety



Allowing the European Court of Justice to decide if British companies are meeting the rules



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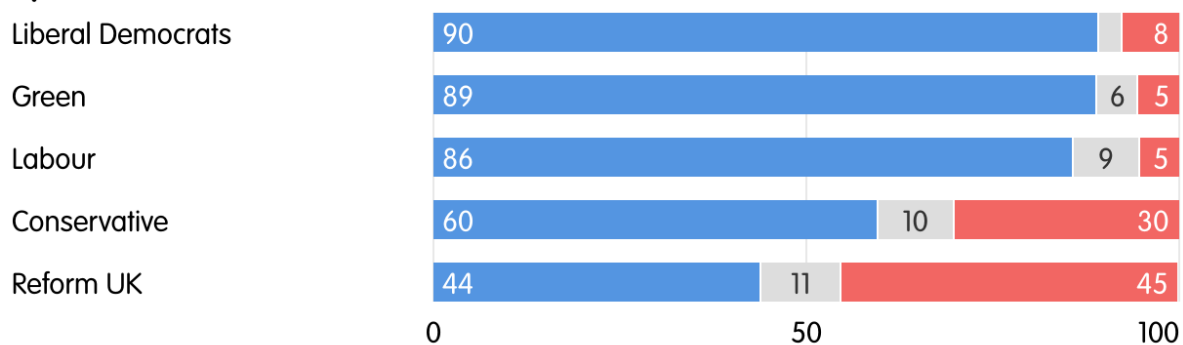
That latter compromise would even be acceptable for a majority (54 per cent) of pre-Brexit voters, two thirds (66 per cent) of hero voters, and majority (59 per cent) of red wall voters. This is striking given that freedom of movement has been such a neuralgic issue in British politics. One possible explanation may be the fact that net migration into the country has tripled since Britain left the EU – meaning that some people may no longer see Brexit as a solution to that issue.

**UK respondents: If the UK could regain special access to the European market, would you or would you not be willing to accept the following conditions? - Allowing EU citizens to travel, live and work in the UK - and UK citizens to do the same throughout the EU.**

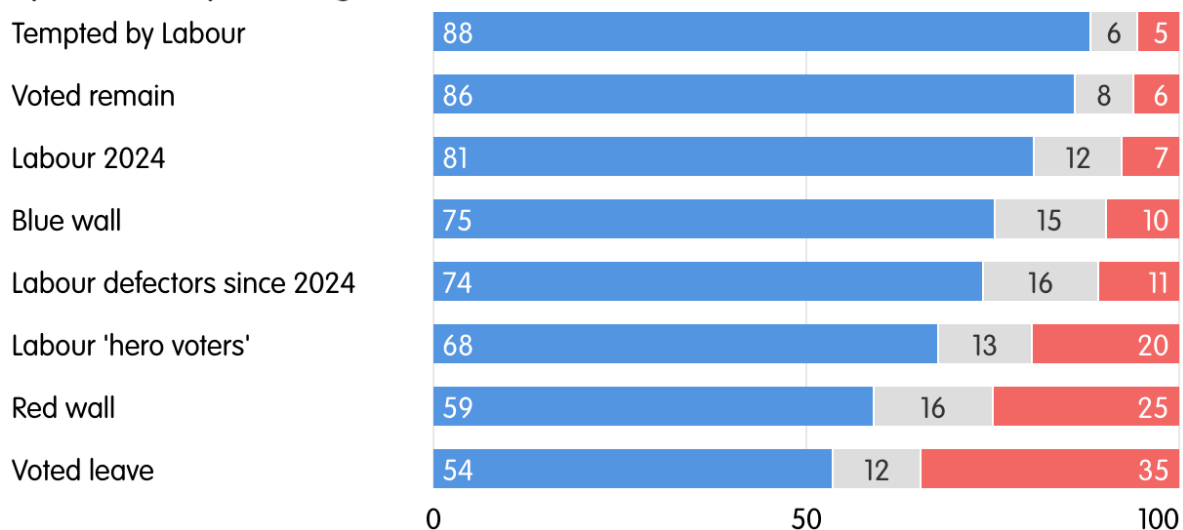
In per cent

■ Would be willing to accept ■ Would not be willing to accept ■ Don't know

**By voter intention**



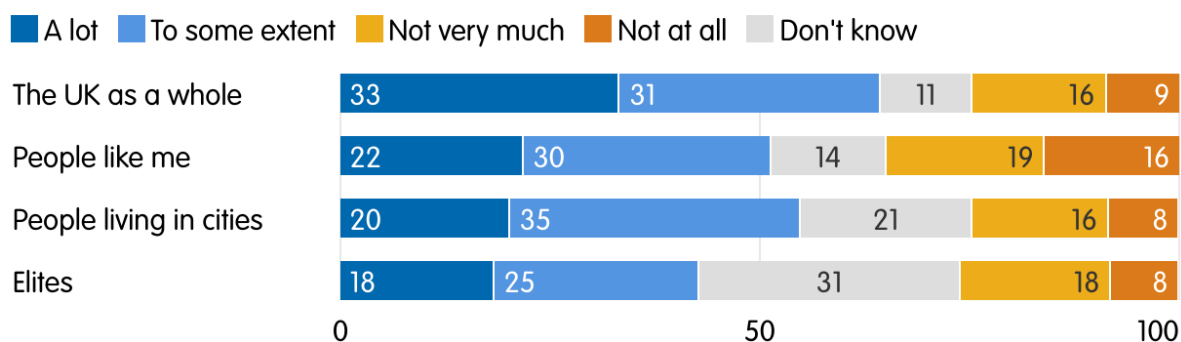
**By Labour's key voter segments**



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A further finding of our survey is Brits generally do not see closer EU-UK cooperation as an elitist project. A clear majority believe that “the UK as a whole” would benefit from it, higher than the share that says the same of “people living in cities”. One challenge is that the share who say “people like me” would benefit is lower still, at 52 per cent. But only 43 per cent believe that “elites” would benefit; a stark challenge to the narrative in much of the British political class.

## UK respondents: To what extent, if at all, do you think the following groups of people would benefit from closer cooperation between the UK and the EU? In per cent



Source: Public opinion survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis for ECFR over 11-24 November 2024  
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## From new perspectives to a new relationship

“Love, love will tear us apart,” sang the English band Joy Division. But Trump (along with Putin and Xi Jinping) seems to be having the opposite effect on the post-Brexit divides between Britain and Europe. Europeans on both sides of the Channel feel they are losing agency in a world defined by the weaponisation of everything from energy bills, migration, and the internet to global problems like climate change and pandemics. And that is driving them closer together.

Since 2015, the EU’s share of global GDP has dropped from 20 to 17 per cent. By contrast, that of the US has grown from 24 to 26 per cent and China’s has increased from 15 to 17 per cent. Meanwhile the UK too has struggled economically, with economists estimating that its productivity is 24 per cent lower than it would have been if it had followed its pre-financial crisis trendline. Brexit has exacerbated both Britain’s and the EU’s relative weaknesses. Our opinion poll shows that the publics seem to realise this, and are open to move on from the debates of the last few years.

Our advice both to EU leaders and to Starmer's government is therefore to:

1. **Go big and go fast.** The EU and the UK are both highly vulnerable to prevailing global events. A reset of relations is the single most effective way to make both sides stronger. The red lines that loomed so large in recent years now look smaller to public opinion on both sides when compared with the benefits of closer co-operation.
2. **Start with the crises.** Governments and champions of a closer EU-UK relationship should show how it will secure ordinary voters against the crises that most concern them: economic security, living standards, and physical safety. The ideal cross-Channel reset would build a package that delivers across all three.
3. **Show that a reset benefits working people.** Improving relations between the EU and the UK is not an elitist project. Voters largely seem to recognise that already. But policymakers and pro-rapprochement campaigners should press home that advantage by stating more confidently the case for a "people's reset" in relations that benefits more than just graduates and other high-earners.

Acting on these points may be difficult in practice – not least due to the sheer number of other priorities and crises demanding government attentions – but our poll reveals that electorates on both sides of the Channel are open to something much more ambitious than their leaders seem to acknowledge. Any EU-UK negotiation is likely to be complex and tortuous, of course. Yet our poll shows that publics will not be a brake on progress. They have moved on from 2016, and want the UK and EU to come together to respond better to the existential common challenges of our post-post-Cold War age.

## Methodology

This report is based on a public opinion poll of adult populations (aged 18 and over) conducted in mid-November 2024 in six countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the UK). The total number of respondents was 9,278.

The poll was carried out online by Datapraxix and YouGov in France (11-24 November, 2,008 respondents), Germany (11-20 November, 2,026 respondents), Italy (11-20 November, 1,512 respondents), Poland (11-24 November, 1,018 respondents), Spain (11-19 November, 1,010 respondents), and the UK (11-18 November, 2,125 respondents). In all these countries the sample was nationally representative of basic demographics and past votes.

Selected British voter groups are defined as follows:

- **Labour's hero voters:** British respondents who voted for the Conservatives in 2019 but switched to Labour in 2024, or would vote for (or consider voting for) Labour now
- **Blue wall voters:** voters in constituencies (mostly in southern England) with a high level of degree holders, which were traditionally held by the Conservatives (including in 2019) but voted to remain in the EU in 2016 and are thus seen as potentially vulnerable to gains by either the Liberal Democrats or Labour
- **Red wall voters:** voters in constituencies (mostly in the Midlands and northern England), which were traditionally held by Labour (including in 2017) but voted mostly to leave the EU in 2016 and flipped to the Conservatives in 2019
- **Tempted by Labour:** those voters who would consider voting for Labour today, even if the party would not currently be their first choice

## About the author

Mark Leonard is co-founder and director of the European Council on Foreign Relations. He is the author of “The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict”. He also presents ECFR’s weekly “World in 30 Minutes” podcast.



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