

# **BREXIT ISN'T WORKING: BRITISH VOTERS ARE READY FOR A EUROPEAN FUTURE**

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June 2026

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## **SUMMARY**

- New ECFR polling shows British voters see Brexit as a disaster. They are strikingly open to reintegration with the EU. Three quarters want a closer relationship.
- They see that as key to improvements on the economy, security and migration. Old red lines are falling away, with a majority open to freedom of movement and even a European nuclear deterrent.
- Brits much prefer EU states and even the EU itself over the US, sentiments that are reciprocated within the union.
- Leaving the 2016 politics of “leavers” and “remainers” far behind, they are now split into “Optimists” (for confident reintegration), “Realists” (for negotiated closer relations) and “Loners” (for continued distance).
- Politicians must build a broad consensus on UK-EU relations reflecting the Britain of 2026 rather than that of 2016.

# Introduction

On June 23rd 2016, when the British electorate chose to leave the EU, it was rejecting the status quo. Britain had been ensconced in the EU for 43 years, and Brexit was the insurgent option onto which unhappy voters could project their hopes and fears. Ten years on, the sky has darkened amid trade wars, real wars, a rising China and an erratic and confrontational Donald Trump. Brits have realised that their hopes for life outside the EU have not been fulfilled. Brexit itself is now the status quo, and they have turned against it.

That much has become clear across recent opinion research, including [past polling](#) commissioned by ECFR. But a new series of four polls of British voters conducted for ECFR in May 2026 show that the shift may be more substantial still.

Surprisingly, not only do majorities of British voters think Brexit has damaged the country in various ways, but they are open to a new relationship with Europe that hitherto seemed out of the question. This includes embracing closer trading links, freedom of movement and supporting a European nuclear deterrent (with a plurality even favouring British participation in a European army). In part at least, Britain's new pro-European majority spans the leaver and remainer camps.

The polling indicates that the bleak international situation has transformed domestic politics as well. Respondents hold both EU member states and the EU itself in much greater esteem than they do the US; a strong plurality identify more common interests with the EU than with the Commonwealth or the US; and many more Brits believe their continental neighbours would help them repel an attack than trust Washington to do so. Moreover, new ECFR polling within the EU, also published in this paper, shows that many voters there also look positively on the UK and prospects for closer relations.

So stark are these findings that they invite a healthy dose of scepticism. Can they really be true of a country that, even as an EU member, was often queasy about deeper integration? In which Nigel Farage's right-wing Reform UK is now leading in the polls? In which swathes of the media eco-system have long portrayed reopening the European question as tantamount to treason? In which, a decade on from the referendum, even many pro-European politicians have made their peace with Brexit?

Several factors might explain this apparent paradox:

- The country is now a decade on from the vote. The chaotic world of 2026 is significantly different to that of 2016 and in many respects darker and more daunting for a state like

Britain—with the spectres of Trump, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping looming large. With the UK’s main trading relationship damaged by Brexit and its security one undermined by an unreliable US president, it should thus not be unthinkable that voters’ outlooks have shifted, even drastically, in response. And that is without reckoning with the demographic churn of the electorate.

- Any such shifts linked to geopolitical or demographic change are bound to create a dissonance with a political and media class that often seems to be stuck in 2016. Witness the enduring habit of delineating the electorate into “leavers” and “remainers” (the latest example being the Makerfield by-election) and harking back to memories and reference points from the referendum.
- ECFR’s new polling shows that the old categories of “leaver” and “remainer” are losing their descriptive value, and reveals instead a more accurate and tripartite taxonomy of British voters in 2026: “Optimists” (who see themselves as part of a community of fate with their neighbours), “Realists” (emotionally open to cooperation but swayed by costs and practicalities) and “Loners” (who want to retain or increase Britain’s distance).
- Relatedly, the political geometry of the Europe question is shifting. In 2016, it split the British progressive vote; a wedge dividing the Labour Party’s post-industrial provincial base from its cosmopolitan big-city one. Today, support for a closer relationship unifies that coalition, from Labour to the Greens to even a majority of erstwhile Labour voters who now back Reform. The dividing line, meanwhile, is now on the right, with Conservative supporters in particular split on Europe.

It may well be the case that the pro-European turn revealed by the polling is shallow and perhaps even fleeting. If so, whether it translates into a real policy shift will depend on whether advocates of a closer relationship can mobilise and firm up this sentiment, or whether Eurosceptics can reframe debates and move opinion back their way.

The side that best shakes off the old thought patterns of 2016, and grapples honestly with today’s lived realities and sentiments, is the one most likely to succeed. The Brexit divide may have represented an earthquake in British politics a decade ago, and even a useful category in the 2017 and 2019 general elections, but with each passing year it is becoming less relevant as new experiences and debates reconfigure an electorate that is itself evolving over time. Talk of “leavers” and “remainers” is on the way to resembling that of Roundheads and Cavaliers in the English Civil War, or of supporters and opponents of the 19th-century Corn Laws; the relic of a long-past historical clash rather than a guide to future political behaviour.

This paper sets out both the pro-European turn in British opinion and the new categories of voters revealed by ECFR’s polling. It concludes with reflections on how to overcome the polarisation of recent years and forge a broad-based new consensus on the UK’s relationship with the EU in 2026.

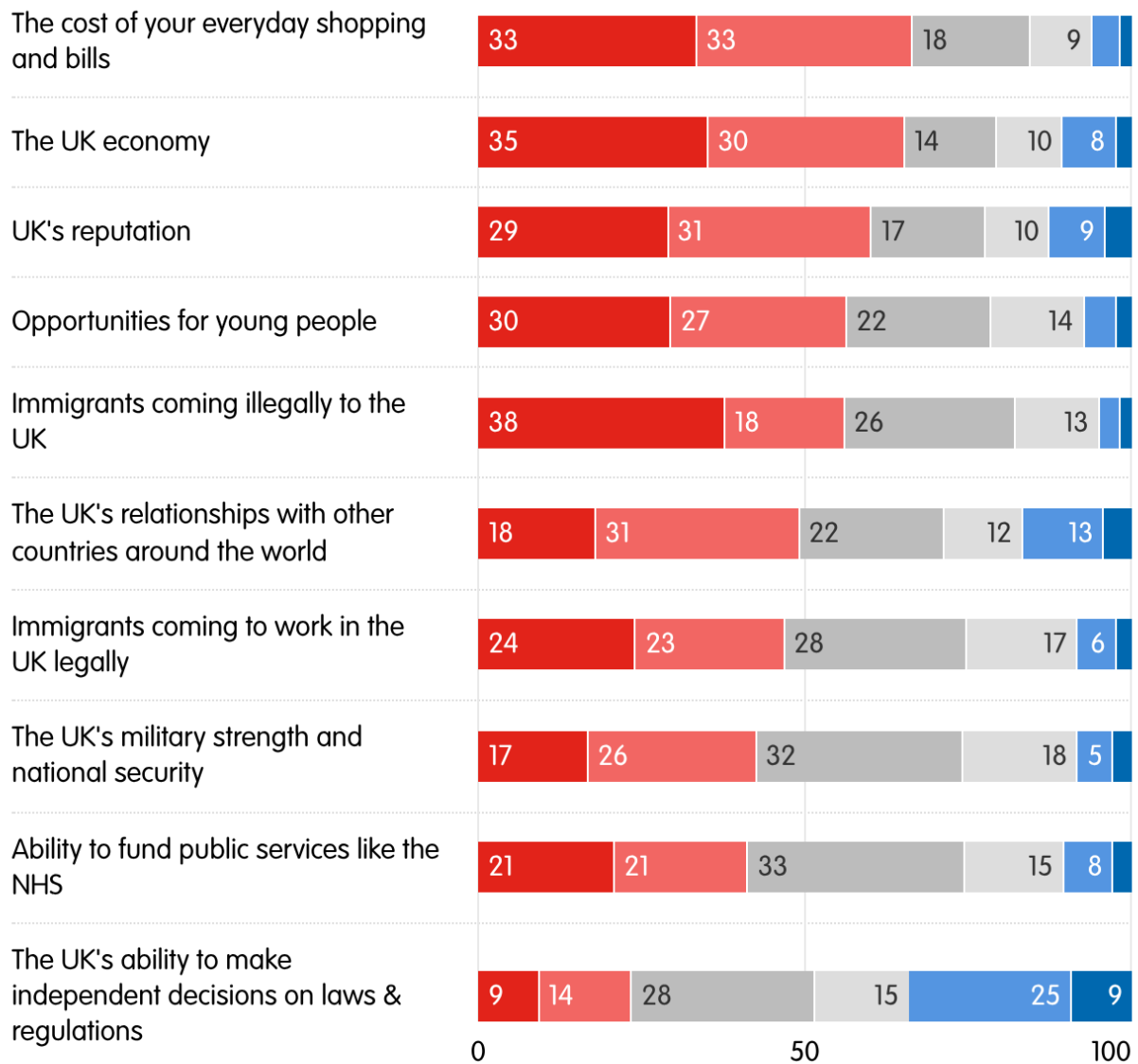
# The new context

First, the verdict a decade on: across the board, British voters believe that Brexit has had a negative impact on nearly every issue they care about.

**Figure 1**

## Do you think the UK leaving the EU has had a positive or negative impact, if any, on the following areas? In %

Very negative   Somewhat negative   No impact   Don't know   Somewhat positive   Very positive



Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

Voters report negative effects on the cost of living (66%), the economy (65%), opportunities for young people (57%) and illegal immigration (56%). Strikingly, even 58% of those who voted for Brexit believe it made illegal immigration worse—the topic at the heart of the referendum campaign. When asked what the main benefits of Brexit are, the most common answer by far is “don’t know”. And the second most popular is “none of the above”. In other words, Brexit is

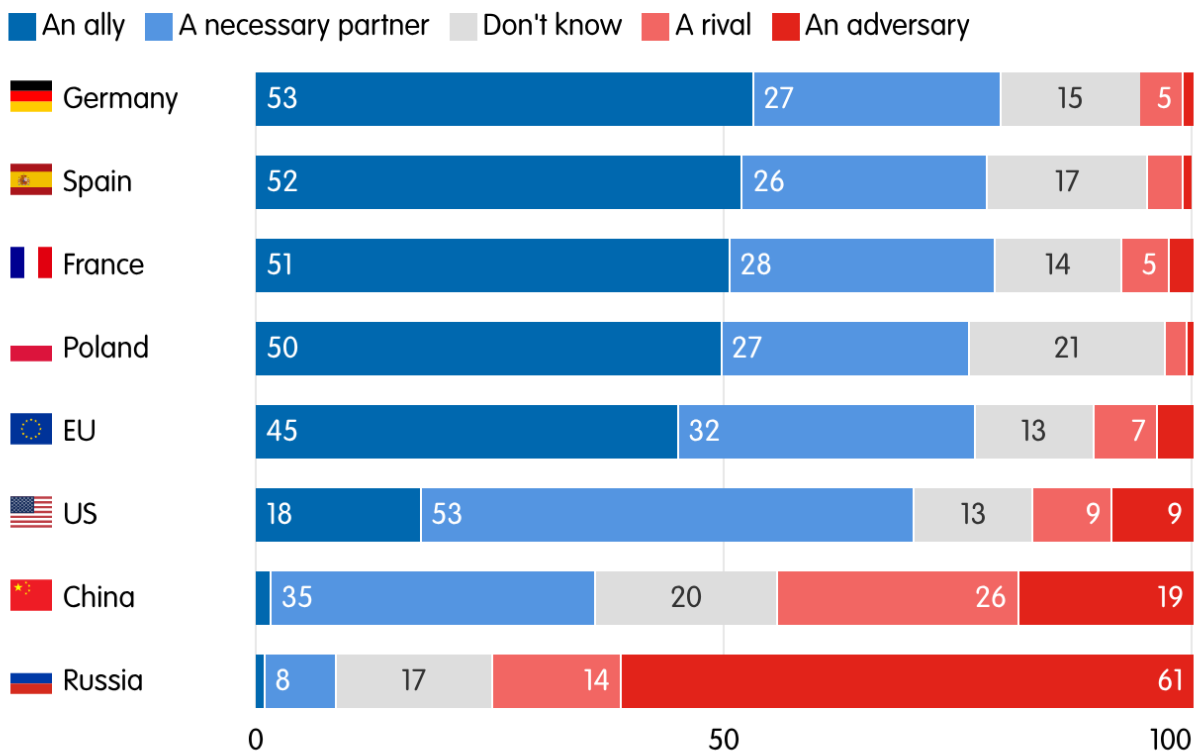
judged to have done real damage for no apparent upside.

This negative perception translates into a desire for closer ties with the EU—even among those who voted to leave. ECFR’s survey shows that 75% want some form of closer relationship compared with just 8% who want a more distant one (more on this in Figure 18 later in this paper). Even among leave voters the margin is 66% to 15%.

This seems to be linked to a major reassessment of Britain’s economic and security relationship with the US, itself apparently linked to the erratic acts of the second Trump term. Only 18% of Brits see America as an ally today, while majorities of them view Europeans—France, Germany, Poland and Spain—as such. The British public feels almost as positively about the EU as well. This suggests that the old Brexit-era notion of pursuing bilateral relations with individual states at the cost of relations with Brussels is another relic of the past.

Figure 2

**Generally speaking, thinking about each country or entity, which of the following best reflects your view on who they are to the UK? In %**



Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
 ECFR · ecf.eu

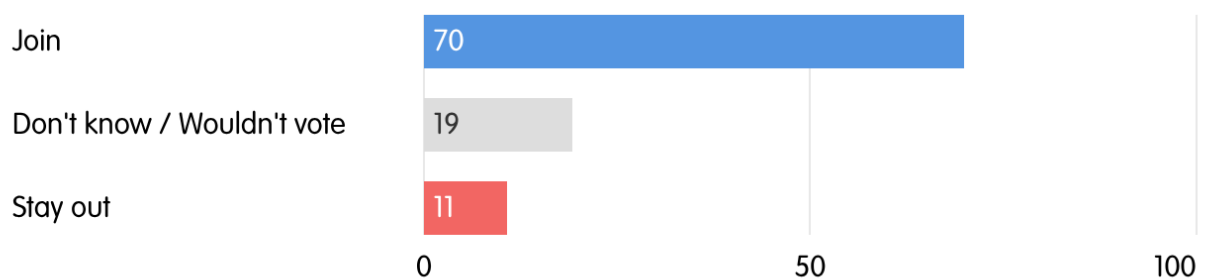
Part of the new context is also a changed makeup of the electorate in 2026. Of the roughly 48 million people who are eligible to vote in the UK today, 6 million were not eligible to vote in

2016. And more than 6 million who voted in 2016 have now died. Observers like the veteran pollster Peter Kellner, who estimates that these changes mean the remainer-leave balance is now 16.8 million to 14.7 million, have asked whether it is democratic for the population of 2016 to bind the country's choices for so many years into the future.

ECFR's survey suggests that the new people who have entered the electorate would vote to join by a margin of six to one—dramatically altering the balance of opinion compared with 2016.

**Figure 3**

**If there were a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, how would you vote?** Participants that were too young to vote in the 2016 referendum, in %



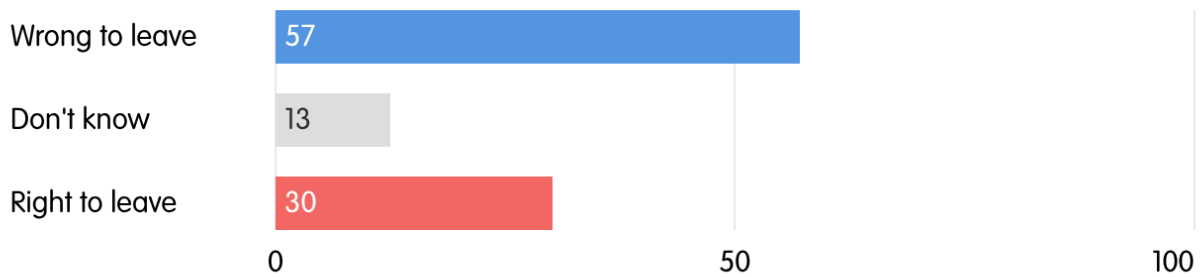
Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

## The new politics in the UK

As the anniversary approaches, British pro-Europeans may be tempted to relitigate 2016 and argue that Brexit was a mistake which should be reversed. Indeed, Figure 4 shows that a sizable majority of Brits now think, in hindsight, that it was. But that framing is self-defeating, and it ignores a more fundamental truth: like it or loathe it, there is no going back to 2016.

**Figure 4**

### **In hindsight, do you think the UK was right or wrong to vote to leave the EU? In %**



Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

Consider what has changed since the year of the referendum. When the Brexit vote took place, Barack Obama was in the White House; Europe was (mostly) at peace; the transatlantic consensus favoured more free trade; and David Cameron had just proclaimed a “golden era” of UK-China relations. Today, Obama has given way to a predatory Trump administration which threatens to annex the territory of NATO allies. Free trade has given way to greater tariffs and protectionism. And the golden era has been replaced by the “China shock 2.0”. Meanwhile, war rages in Ukraine and could soon threaten the rest of the continent. Most recently, the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz has shown how little control Brits have over their own energy and food security if other global players choose to disregard their interests—making a stronger case for co-operation with their immediate neighbours.

Moreover, as a result of these shifts, the EU itself has changed almost beyond recognition. From a union fundamentally oriented around market integration it has become one primarily centred on security in all its forms, heavily focused on rearmament and geopolitical sovereignty. The question for the UK, then, is not how to return to the past, but what relationship it wants with Europe in the 2030s and 2040s, particularly on three politically vital topics: prosperity, security and control of migration. ECFR’s polling finds that on all three, and often irrespective of how Brits voted in 2016, they are looking to Europe.

## On the economy: cost-of-living concerns are cutting through old red lines

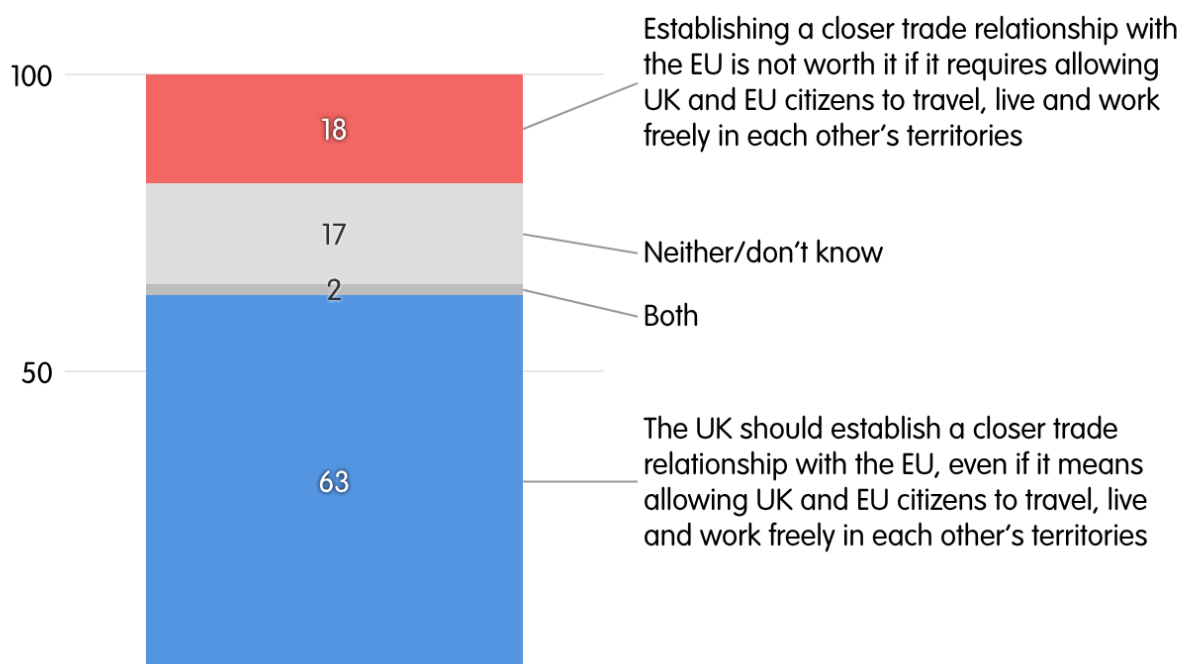
As this paper has already noted (in Figure 1), gloom about Brexit is most pronounced on economic matters. Ten years after the referendum, most voters think the economic impact has

been bad for them personally and the country at large: about two-thirds say Brexit worsened the cost of living (54% of Conservative supporters, and a 43% plurality of Reform ones) and that it hurt the economy.

Today, demand for closer economic ties is firmly majoritarian and faces limited opposition. Strikingly, when the topic was so central to the Brexit campaign a decade ago, 63% of British voters claim they would accept freedom of movement for EU citizens in exchange for a closer trade relationship, while only 18% would reject this.

**Figure 5**

**Looking at each of the following pairs of statements, does the first or second statement come closer to your view? In %**



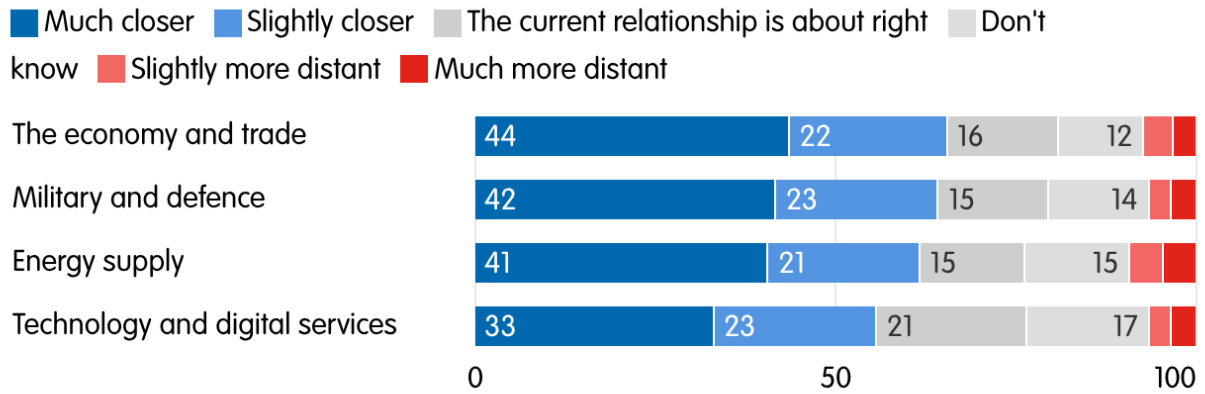
Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

## On security: turn to Europe, not the US

ECFR's polling also indicates that Brits' enthusiasm for closer ties with the EU is about equally strong across economic, security and energy topics. This makes sense particularly in a moment—like the current energy shock—where those topics are so closely interlinked.

Figure 6

**Thinking about the UK's future relationship with the European Union in the following areas, would you say it should be closer or more distant, or is the current relationship about right? In %**

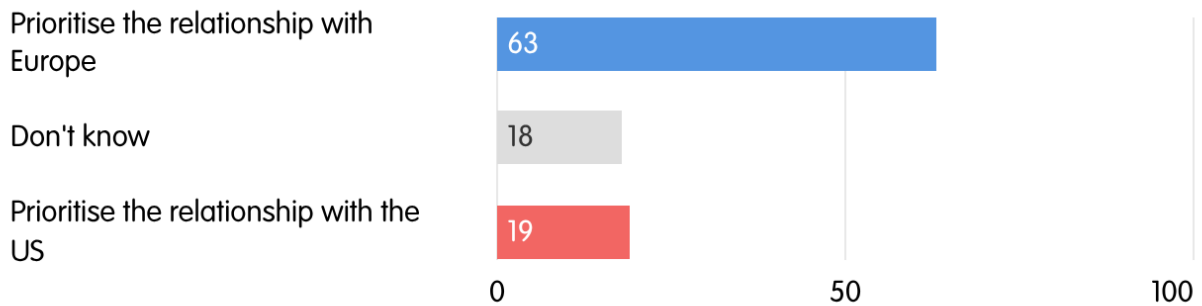


Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

The support for closer defence cooperation in particular chimes with respondents' hesitations about Trump's US. Fully 63% would prioritise relations Europe, over 19% for the US (with even Conservative supporters breaking 50%-to-28% this way). It would make sense, when the US administration is threatening its own NATO allies and is at best ambivalent on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, that a plurality of Brits should want much closer defence ties to the EU. Here too, pro-EU sentiments among Tories illustrate the scale of the shift, with 40% of Conservative supporters wanting this.

Figure 7

**If you had to choose, which of the following comes closest to your view when thinking about the UK's relationship with the US and Europe? In %**

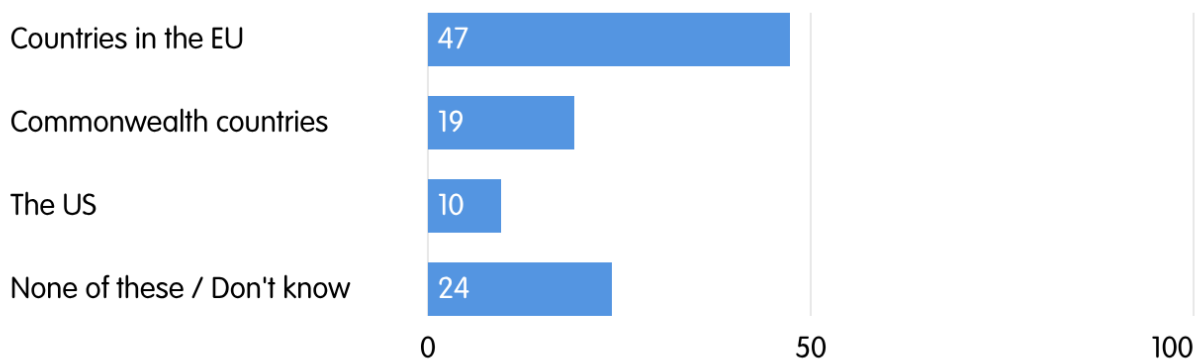


Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
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Relevant to this, a plurality of British respondents think their country's interests are more closely aligned with those of the EU than those the US or even the Commonwealth. That they responded thus to a question focused on international crises hints at how a decade of turmoil, much of it felt both in the UK and the EU alike, has reinforced Britain's sense of Europeanness.

Figure 8

**In the event of a major global energy crisis or international conflict, which partner do you believe is most likely to share the UK's immediate interests? In %**



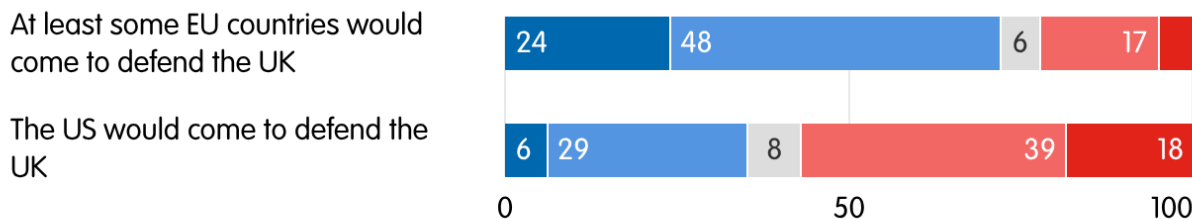
Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

A similar pattern emerges when Brits are asked to imagine an attack on the country. Only 35% think the US would help defend the UK but 72% think at least some European countries would do so.

**Figure 9**

**If the UK were attacked, how confident are you that... In %**

Very confident Fairly confident Don't know Not very confident Not at all confident

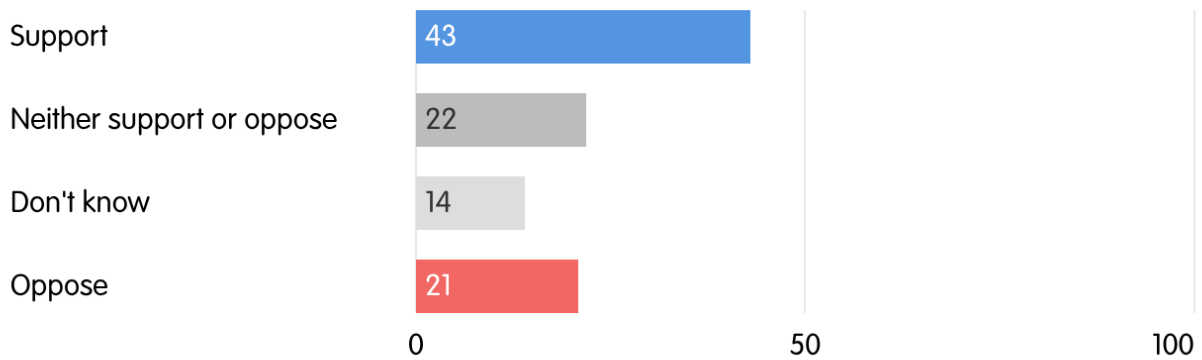


Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026  
 ECFR · ecf.eu

No surprise, then, that Brits want to work more closely with Europeans on security. For example, 65% back sharing military resources and intelligence, including a majority of leave voters. Remarkably, even the perennial Eurosceptic bugbear of a “European army with British troops in it”—long a favourite scare-story of British tabloid newspapers—has become a relatively popular idea, as Figure 10 shows.

**Figure 10**

**Do you support or oppose creating a European army that includes forces from the UK? In %**

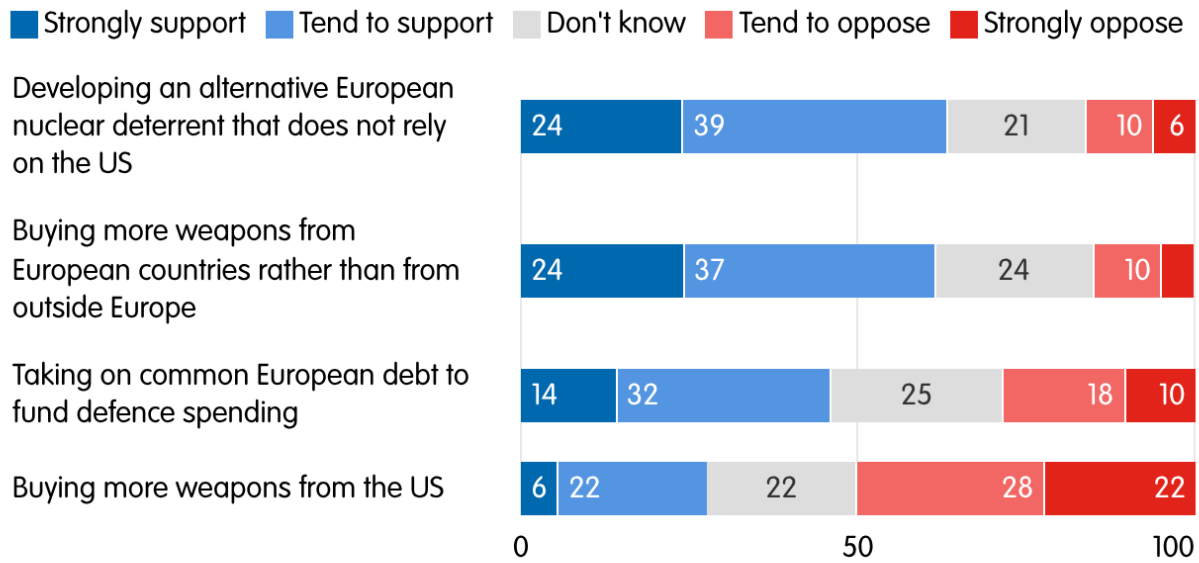


Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

British attitudes towards European strategic autonomy have evolved so far that, in places, they look almost French. A 50% plurality do not want to buy more weapons from the US, while 61% want to follow a “Buy European” policy. Pluralities would join other European countries in taking on common debt to pay for defence spending and sending troops to defend the Baltics or to Ukraine after a peace settlement. Most striking is the fact that almost two-thirds of Brits now want to develop an alternative European nuclear deterrent which is not reliant on America.

Figure 11

**Would you support or oppose the UK doing each of the following? In %**



Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

## On migration: Brits support co-operation

Few voters think that Brexit has helped control migration. This paper has already shown (in Figure 1) that 56% of the poll respondents believe it has frustrated tackling illegal arrivals, for example.

Figure 12

## Thinking about immigrants coming to the UK in small boats, which of the following comes closest to your view? In %



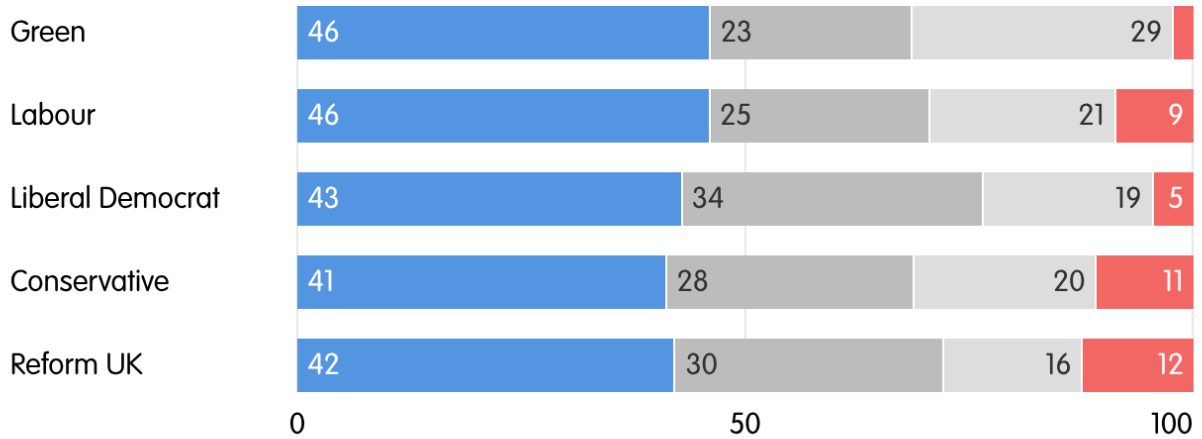
Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

Indeed 42% of Reform voters believe there were fewer small boat crossings before Brexit (compared with 8% who disagree)—slightly higher than the UK average. Whether they actively blame that on leaving the EU is less clear, but nonetheless the finding appears to show cross-party room for greater UK-EU cooperation on border control and enforcement.

Figure 13

### Thinking about immigrants coming to the UK in small boats, which of the following comes closest to your view? In %

■ There were fewer immigrants coming to the UK in small boats when the UK was a member of the EU ■ There are about the same number now as there was when the UK was a member of the EU ■ Don't know ■ There were more immigrants coming to the UK in small boats when the UK was a member of the EU



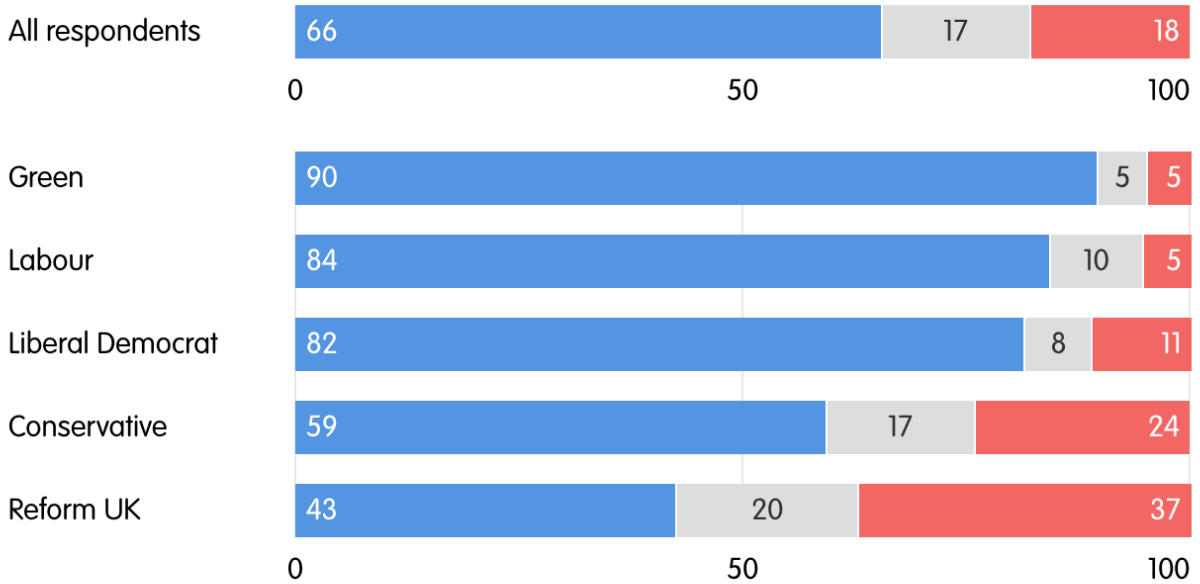
Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

The perceived failure of post-Brexit immigration policy seems to have changed the politics around UK-EU freedom of movement. ECFR’s poll found that a majority of 66%—including 57% of leavers—would now accept freedom of movement outright while only 18% reject it. This suggests that freedom of movement no longer holds the centrality it used to in the UK’s Europe debate.

Figure 14

**Looking at each of the following pairs of statements, does the first or second statement come closer to your view? In %**

■ I want UK citizens to be able to travel, live and work freely in the EU even if it means EU citizens can do the same here ■ Both/Neither or Don't know ■ I do not want UK citizens to be able to travel, live and work freely in the EU if it means EU citizens can do the same here



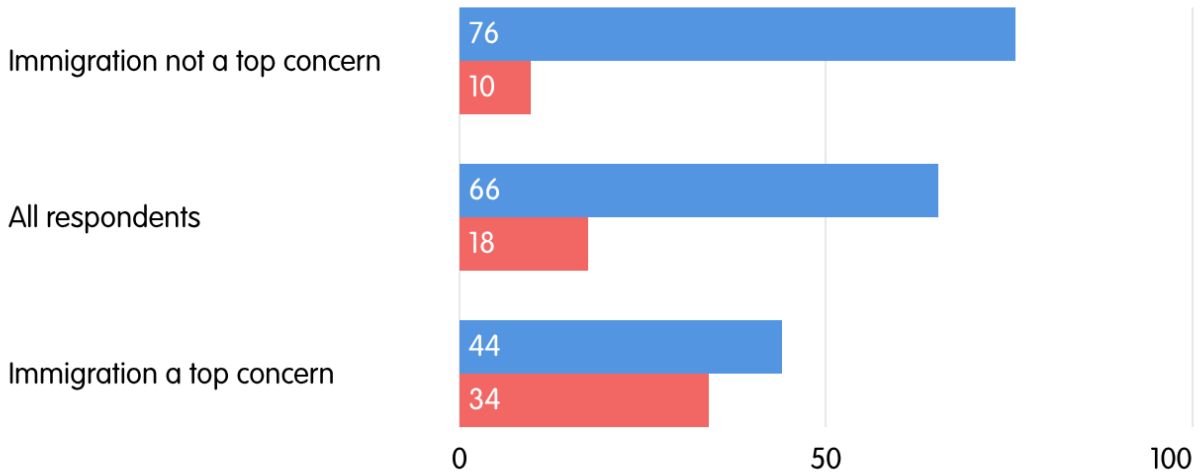
Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

The polling shows that few voters include “immigrants coming to work legally in the UK” in their list of top concerns. And even among those whose top concern is immigration, a plurality still supports freedom of movement with the EU.

Figure 15

## Looking at each of the following pairs of statements, does the first or second statement come closer to your view? In %

■ I want UK citizens to be able to travel, live and work freely in the EU even if it means EU citizens can do the same here ■ I do not want UK citizens to be able to travel, live and work freely in the EU if it means EU citizens can do the same here



Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

Across the board, then, from security to economy to migration, the British debate on Europe has moved on fundamentally from 2016. Many of the bugs of the past (such as an EU army or freedom of movement) seem to have returned as features which enjoy cross-cutting societal support.

## The new politics in Europe

Just as Britain has moved on from Brexit, so too have Europeans. The continent has been transformed by the crises of the past few years—Ukraine, Trump, the China shock—and Europeans are rethinking many of their fundamental assumptions. They share many of the same fears as British voters: anxiety about Putin and Xi, uncertainty about how much they can rely on Washington, and a growing sense that they need to pull together.

Today's EU has changed significantly since 2016. Then, Europe was at its core a peace project which aspired to open trade and open borders. It has since had to reinvent itself as a security community. Across the board, open borders have been replaced by much tougher migration policies. And free trade has given way, in some places at least, to derisking strategies and export

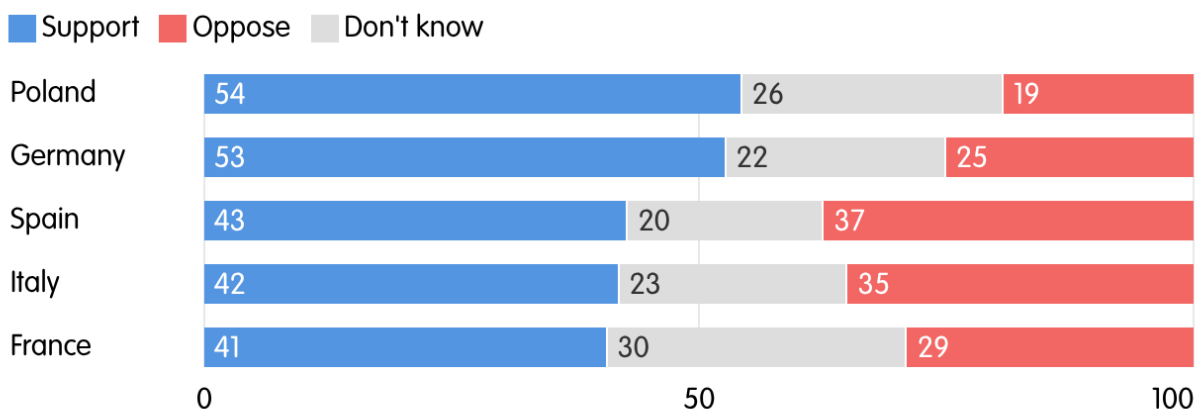
controls. The bloc’s leaders are now talking about rearmament, strategic autonomy and existential threats in a register that would have seemed alarmist a decade ago. Today, much more is driving Europeans and Brits closer together than is pulling them apart.

Already in 2024, European voters said the European Commission should be more flexible on its red lines. ECFR’s poll from that year showed that Europeans were open to this, particularly where fears of British “cherry-picking” of elements of EU membership were concerned. For example, majorities in Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and a 47% near-majority in France supported giving the UK access to the EU’s research programmes in exchange for closer security co-operation.

Figure 16

**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 %**

← 1 of 3 →



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

More recent ECFR polling in continental Europe shows that, one year into Trump’s second term, most European citizens would welcome Britain into the EU. Across the EU, 66% of voters would support the UK joining—more than the share that endorses simply a closer relationship (59%) or the status quo (46%). Support for UK membership is a majority position everywhere: from 56% in Bulgaria and 59% in France and Italy, to 75% in the Netherlands and Denmark. Danes are the most enthusiastic of all, with 49% saying they back the idea “a lot”.

European voters of several new-right parties are surprisingly supportive of closer relations with the UK, including a majority of Alternative for Germany backers (58%) and, in France, National Rally (RN) (58%) ones. When it comes to the UK rejoining the EU, 71% of supporters of far-right Confederation in Poland and 57% of Danish People's Party (DF) voters are in favour, while outright opposition remains remarkably low. Rejection is limited to less than a third of voters across these four groups. The overwhelming majority of new-right voters also view the UK as an ally or necessary partner, representing more than three quarters of Crown (a Polish far-right party), RN and DF respondents.

Among overall populations, people in the EU tend to see the UK as an ally (36%) or, at least, as a partner (39%). Again, the keenest are Denmark (62% there see it as an ally) and the Netherlands (57%); and the coolest are the Bulgarians (11%).

This is reflected among many European leaders as well. Some in the British media have questioned the extent to which EU governments and officials would embrace a new relationship—but many are on the record welcoming the idea. French president Emmanuel Macron has said that the door is “always open”. Spain's prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, affirmed that Spain would “absolutely” support British membership should the UK decide to start the process again, stressing there was “a clear need to have the UK on board again, especially nowadays”. Alexander Stubb, Finland's president, explicitly named the UK as a candidate for membership and has said “we need a UK voice in Europe. We really miss you guys.” Then, in May 2026, the European Green Party became the first European political family to invite the UK formally to rejoin the EU.

## What kind of new relationship do British people want?

Back in Britain, the domestic political map has shifted in ways Westminster has not yet fully absorbed. While much of the British governing class has maintained a collective silence on the EU for fear of reopening Brexit wounds, a majority of the public has moved on. The polls reveal a very strong and currently unmet political desire for a significant rapprochement between the UK and the EU. Almost three quarters of the public want to get closer whereas under one tenth to go farther.

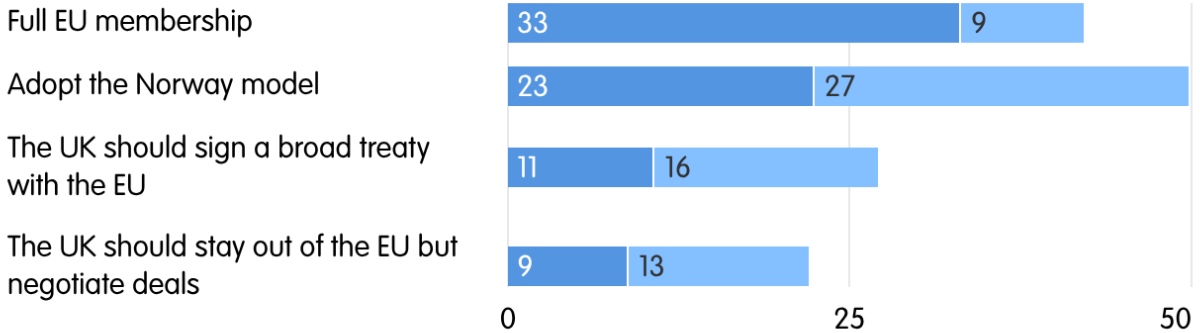
Until very recently, many politicians treated advocating full membership as taboo, so the debate over a closer relationship was confined to a reset within tight limits. But when Brits are asked to pick a single preferred future relationship, the largest group picks full membership (33%), then Norway-style membership of the single market (23%), then a new broad treaty (11%). All of these options would break the Labour government's red lines. Meanwhile the modest reset the Labour government is pursuing, “the UK should stay out of the EU but negotiate deals”, only commands 9% first-ranked support, while the status-quo attracts only 6%.

Figure 17

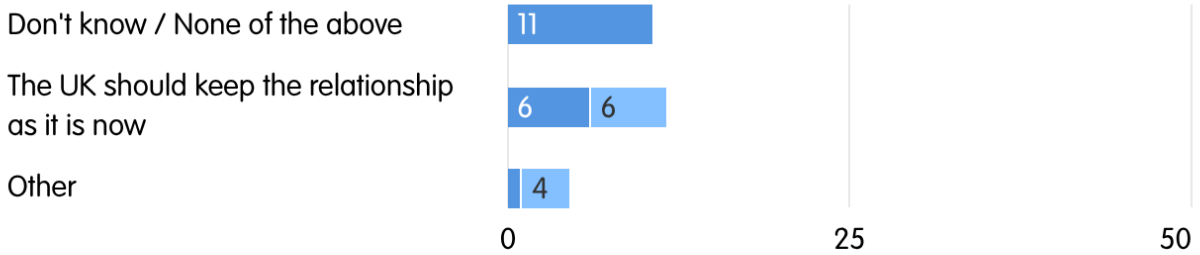
**Which of the following options would be your preferred relationship for the UK to have with the EU?** Answers were ranked in order of importance, in %

Ranked 1st   Ranked 2nd

**Closer**



**Status-quo**



**Further**



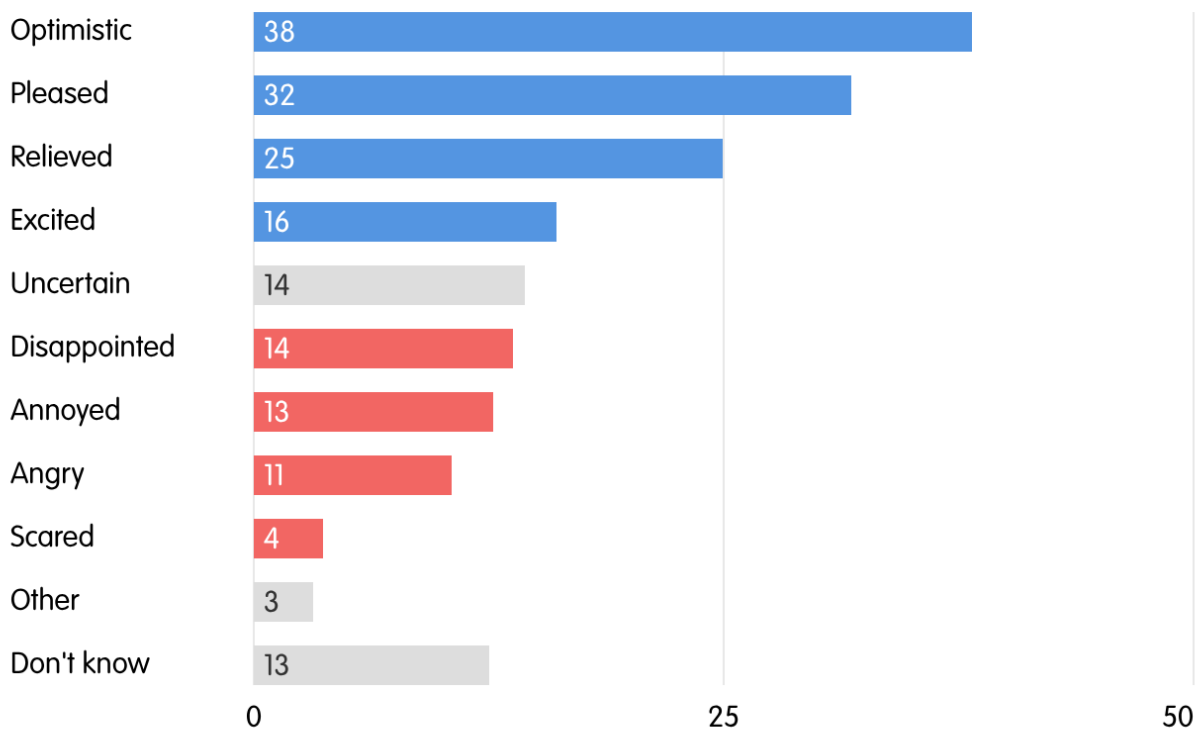
Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

This shows that there is a very broad permissive consensus for going far beyond the government's current reset—and strong reasons for putting something really ambitious on the table that is more likely to deliver change on the cost of living, security and migration. The boldness of a pledge to join a reformed EU could both mobilise political support at home and encourage governments in the EU to expend political capital on helping the UK get it. It is still too early to tell what would happen if the country embarked on that course, but the polling strongly indicates that fears of the political class about Brexit fatigue may well be overstated.

It also challenges the widespread assumption that even if people regret Brexit, they have no appetite to reopen the wound and plunge the country back into years of division. This would cause frustration, exhaustion, anxiety, goes the argument. But the polling tells a different story. When Brits are asked how they actually feel about closer ties with the EU, the most-cited responses are: optimistic, pleased, relieved and excited. Anger, annoyance and even uncertainty are drastically lower.

**Figure 18**

**Imagine the UK was seeking a closer relationship with the EU. How does that make you feel? Select all that apply, in %**

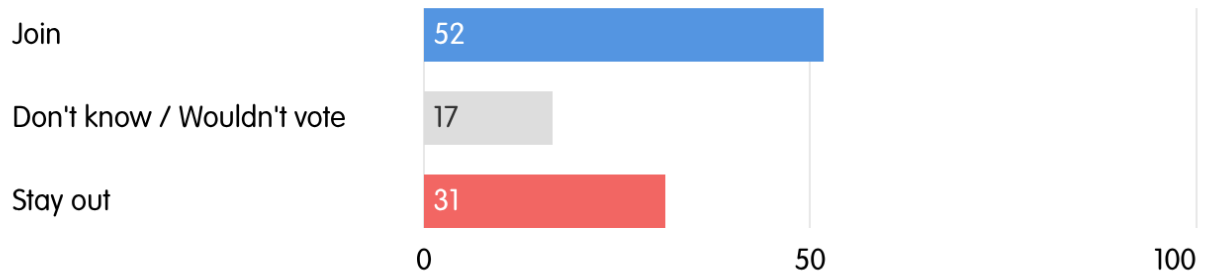


Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

For some time now the polling has suggested that if there were a referendum, the majority of people would vote to join the EU.

Figure 19

### If there was a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, how would you vote? In %



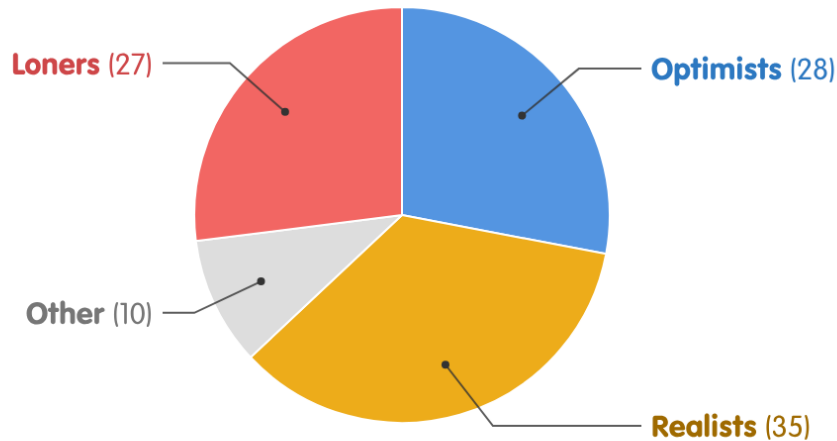
Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecfre.eu

## Beyond leave and remain

All of which demonstrates the folly of relying on how Brits voted in the 2016 referendum to understand their politics today. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Trump’s second coming and China’s new assertiveness—along with a Britain that over that time has experienced political turmoil, a pandemic and growing cost-of-living anxieties—have scrambled the political divisions of the past. New categories are needed for the realities of 2026, shaped both by the question of the future UK-EU relationship and how voters see their national interests in the ongoing “polycrisis”.

Figure 20

## Beyond leave and remain: The UK electorate in 2026. In %



Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

Respondents' answers to ECFR's polling suggest three camps with a much better predictive force in today's British politics than that of the leave-remain split:

**Optimists** (28%) want a closer relationship with the EU in the future and believe the EU would share the UK's interests in a future crisis—positions implying a strong awareness of the country's current geopolitical circumstances and of the value of joint European action in a dangerous world. This group is most concerned with the cost-of-living. It is younger, more male and wealthier than the national average. This category includes 57% of Labour and 56% of Green supporters, along with 48% of Liberal Democrats.

**Realists** (35%) also want a closer relationship with Europe but only a plurality believe the EU rather than other powers would share the country's interests in a crisis (with 26% looking instead to the Commonwealth). They believe in a more hedged Europeanism, in other words, and are more likely to depend on case-by-case judgments of costs and benefits. This group is more split between the cost-of-living and immigration as its top priority. It is well represented among supporters of all parties: 41% of Conservative voters, 41% of Liberal Democrats ones, 37% of Labour ones, 34% of Green ones and 24% Reform ones. They are equally represented across all age groups, and tilt slightly more female.

**Loners** (27%) both want a more distant or the same relationship with Europe and tend to think that other powers, not the EU, would most share their interests in a crisis—suggesting an emphasis on protecting Britain's independence from its European neighbours, even in times of turmoil (and perhaps even due to them). This group sees immigration as the top priority. It is

particularly well represented in Reform supporters (66%) and tends to be older (46% of people over the age of 70 fall into this group) and more male.

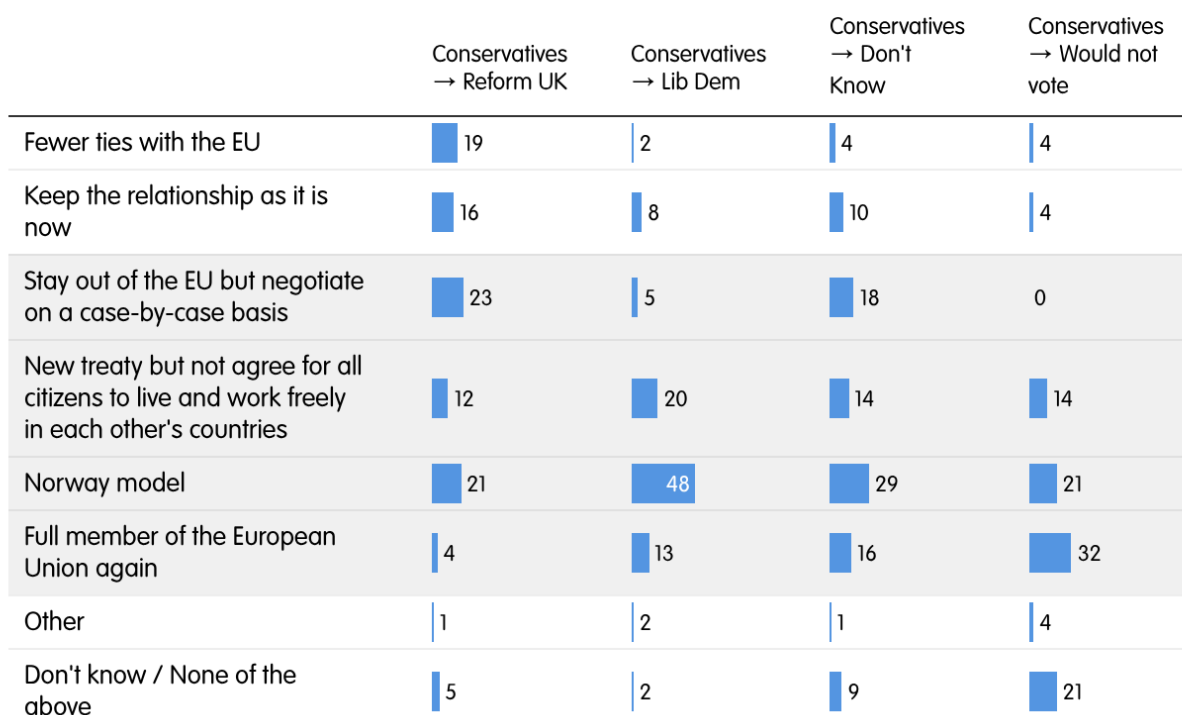
If there were a referendum tomorrow, 97% of Optimists would vote to join the EU. Realists would split 58% for join compared with 23% for staying out. Loners would split between 78% stay out and 7 % join.

## Progressives unified, conservatives split

From a party-political perspective the dynamics are particularly interesting. Only Reform supporters are massively against joining the EU—with 76% opposing it and 13% saying they would vote to join.

On the other hand, ECFR’s polling finds the Conservative camp is split. One in three supporters of this avowedly Eurosceptic party say that they would support joining the EU, creating a quandary for its leader Kemi Badenoch.

**Figure 21**



■ Closer relations

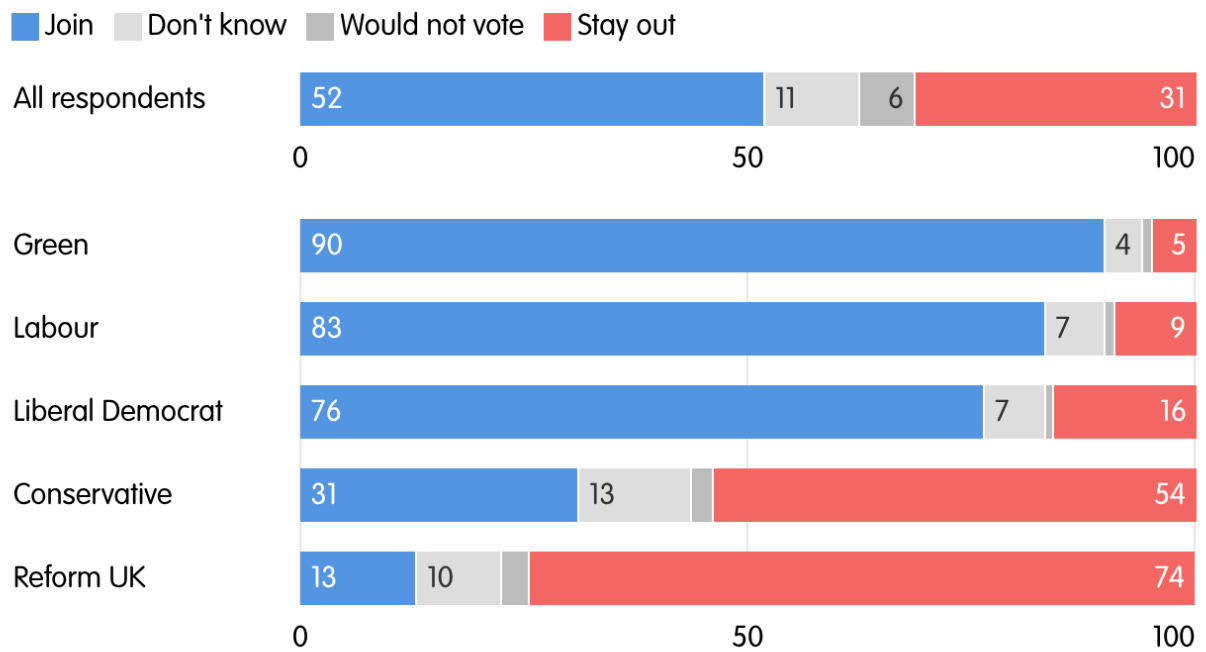
Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
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Even those voters that have turned away from the Conservatives are divided. Most want a closer relationship with the EU, ranging from 60% of defectors to Reform to 86% of those who have switched to the Liberal Democrats. But on the question of rejoin-versus-stay-out, a gulf separates them. Only 8% of the party’s defectors to Reform want to rejoin, but 53% of those to the Liberal Democrats would consider it, as would over a third of former Tories who are now undecided or intend not to vote.

On the other side of the spectrum, by contrast, Europe is a unifying issue. For example, 90% of Greens and 76% of Liberal Democrats supporters claim they would vote to join the EU.

**Figure 22**

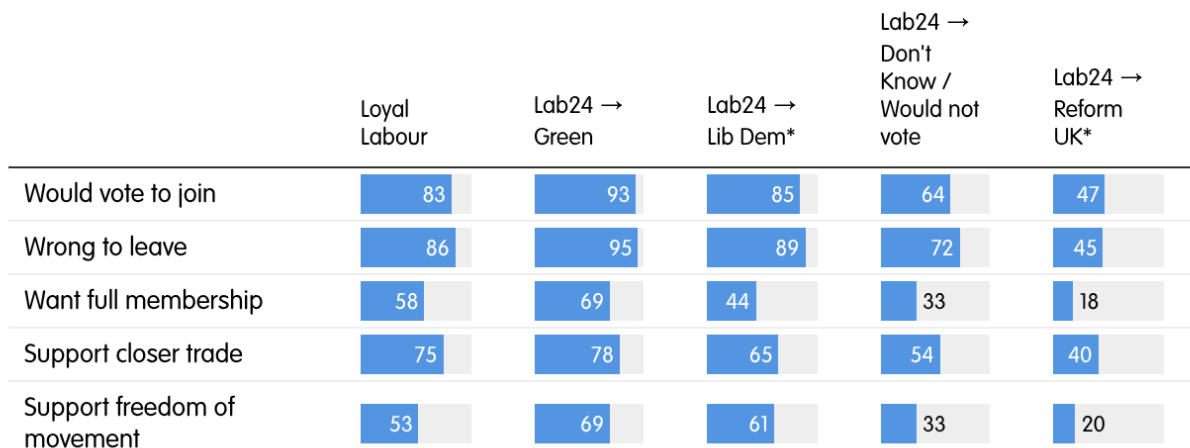
**If there was a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, how would you vote?** Current general election vote, in %



Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
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The Labour voter coalition is also emphatically pro-European. A large majority of current Labour voters would vote to join (83%), think leaving was wrong (86%), back closer trade (75%) and even support freedom of movement (53%).

**Figure 23**



\*Indicative only — small unweighted base

Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
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One of the reasons for the pressure within the party to shift is the fact that Labour has been bleeding its 2024 voters in four directions conventionally seen as pulling different ways on Europe. But three of the four defector streams from Labour—those to the Greens, Lib Dems and the disengaged or non-voting groups—are as pro-European as, or more than, the voters who stayed. Even ex-Labour voters who defected to Reform overwhelmingly prefer a closer relationship to the EU; 78% of them would prefer closer relations while a mere tenth want looser ones.

All of which indicates a stunning political reversal of fortunes. In 2016, the Europe question split the progressive coalition of working-class voters against cosmopolitan professionals. Today it serves to unifies it: support for a closer relationship with Europe is the main thread running through the Labour vote and those who no longer support the party. The dividing line has migrated rightward, where Europe is becoming an issue Conservative leaders will struggle to manage as they try to hold the right together.

## Seize the moment

Where does this leave British politics? The broad contours are clear: Brexit has been a disappointment; voters understand that the world has changed and are repulsed by Trump; a majority of them are open to a closer relationship with the EU. But ECFR's poll findings are also a story of finer differences: varying visions for that future relationship; new divisions within the political right; distinctions between Optimists, Realists and the Loners.

This presents a particular stimulus to pro-Europeans. The political world of 2016 is well and truly consigned to the history books and—to a greater extent than received wisdom in Westminster and the European quarter in Brussels would suggest—a broad majority of voters are open to an ambitious reset with the EU rooted not in emotional Europhilia but in the harsh realities of the global context. The precise depth of this pragmatic enthusiasm, and the corresponding warmth towards Britain from much of the EU, remains to be seen. But it is at least an opening.

A still-broader opportunity, however, also dwells in the polling data presented here. British voters of all political hues have left the old leaver-remainer rift behind. They may well be divided on many other things, as the country's party-political fragmentation suggests, but on the future of UK-EU relations there is a lot of common ground. Therein lies a chance to leave the old polarisation of the 2016 era behind. The referendum ten years ago sometimes seemed to turn colleagues, families, even places against themselves and each other (the BBC's flagship documentary on the anniversary is called "Brexit: A Very British Civil War"). Today's picture is actually more promising: more pro-European, yes, but also a more nuanced patchwork of opinion with a lot of common ground concerning the threats facing the country.

This suggests a series of lessons for politicians and campaigners in the Britain of 2026:

- **Move on from how the Brexit vote was won and implemented**. Some Remain veterans may still feel the need to cry foul; some Leave veterans to crow. But both groups are ultimately veterans of a historical war. The reality now is that solid majorities of Brits believe that Brexit is harming the country in various important areas: living standards, security, disorderly migration. Addressing those through revisions to the UK-EU relationship must be the priority.
- **Connect the bigger picture to the realities of people's lives**. Discussions about the future relationship and the global context seem likely, but must be rooted in those everyday concerns and people's everyday experiences. The biggest challenge will be to convince "Realists" that they can benefit from closer co-operation on the issues that trouble them the most.
- **Do not get bogged down debating every detail of the future relationship with the EU**. Voters have varying views on this, but overall lean strongly towards some form of reconvergence. That is the common ground to stake out—encompassing much of both the progressive wing of British politics but also its pragmatic centre. The government should not focus on its red lines—but open a national debate about what the best options are for achieving British goals on growth, cost of living, migration and security.

- **Talk not about “rejoining” the EU but of “joining” or “advancing into” it.** The former evokes a reversal, or at the very least implies disinterring the arguments of 2016. Neither Britain nor the EU are the same today as they were then. So it is more accurate, and probably less inflammatory, to frame this as a whole new proposition with its own costs and benefits.
- **Move fast and be aware of moments of opportunity internationally.** Action to deliver on any broad British consensus on reconvergence will also depend on the EU and the global context. There, timing will be important. For example, Macron’s final months as French president could be a chance to present him with legacy-burnishing proposals to bring the UK closer into the European fold. Likewise, Trump’s presidency in the US may be another inherently time-limited opening for British pro-Europeans.

Countering polarisation, of course, is not the same thing as seeking to depoliticise the debate. On the contrary, UK-EU relations have too long now been relegated from the heart of British politics: pro-Europeans wary of offending the Brexit consensus and Eurosceptics often reluctant to get into the grim details of an increasingly unpopular decision. The above proposals amount to moving on from those old wounds and putting a pragmatic debate about the relationship back at the centre of public discourse; not in order to divide, but to seek an ambitious new consensus.

Far from harking back to 2016, the goal should be to look forward, and not just to the next year or so. The EU is going through a long-term evolution: from a peace project built around market integration to a geopolitical project centred on sovereignty and agency. Irrespective of its exact status and the exact timeline of the next years, the Britain of 2026 has every reason to play a significant part in that.

The long-term goal at home should be a broad and resilient consensus underpinning British agency in the Europe of the 2030s and 2040s. Beyond Britain’s shores the objective, resting on that domestic foundation, should be a union, of whatever exact form, that melds together the economic and security interests of the UK and the EU in recognition of the sweeping shared interests of the two sides—and in anticipation of more global turmoil to come.

## Methodology

This report is based on four online surveys fielded among adult UK voters by the polling firm Mandate and YouGov on behalf of ECFR. They were: economy survey (2,120 respondents, fielded May 7th-8th 2026); immigration survey (2,134 respondents, fielded May 11th-12th 2026);

security survey (2,126 respondents, fielded May 12th-13th 2026); general survey (2,146 respondents, fielded May 13th-14th 2026).

The figures on views in the EU cited in this paper come from an online opinion poll (full report [here](#)) of adult populations conducted in May 2026 in 15 European countries—with the 13 EU members among them used for the references here. This was carried out for ECFR by Mandate Research and YouGov in Austria (1,012 respondents, April 30th-May 12th, margin of error 3.4), Bulgaria (1,013, April 30th-May 18th, 4.08), Denmark (1,004, April 30th-May 11th, 3.5), France (1,501, May 5th-15th, 3.43), Germany (2,138, April 30th-May 13th, 2.21), Hungary (1,005, April 30th-May 19th, 4.46), Italy (1,503, April 30th-May 14th, 3.1), Netherlands (1,012, April 30th-May 15th, 4.08), Poland (1,570, April 30th-May 15th, 3.09), Portugal (1,003, May 1st-19th, 4.19), Spain (1,542, April 30th-May 11th, 2.56), Sweden (1,077, April 30th-May 11th, 3.3), Switzerland (1,067, April 30th-May 18th, 3.39) and the UK (2,033, April 30th-May 7th, 2.39). Polls were conducted online and over telephone (CATI) by Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in Estonia (1,001, April 30th-May 8th, 3.27).

Assessments of different EU party electorates presented in this paper are based on the voter intention question (“If the next parliamentary election was held tomorrow, how would you vote?”). The one exception was France, where they are based on the electoral sympathy question (“Which political party best defends your ideas?”). The analysis includes only those parties whose supporters meet a minimum sample size of 90 respondents.

All chart figures are rounded to nearest percentage, so some do not sum exactly to 100%.

## About the author

**Mark Leonard** is co-founder and director of the European Council on Foreign Relations. He is the author of [“Surviving Chaos: Geopolitics When the Rules Fail”](#). He also presents ECFR’s weekly “World in 30 Minutes” podcast.

*Supported (in part) by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.*

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