

One crisis among many

Nicolai von Ondarza on how the EU has adapted to a decade of crises – and how Brexit has left its mark on European politics.

European politics in 2026 look very different from those of 2016. Brexit is part of the story, but not the most important part. The deeper changes came from crises that had little direct connection to the UK's departure. Covid prompted the EU to pursue common borrowing on an unprecedented scale. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine turned security, defence and support for Kyiv into central political priorities. Far-right parties have [gained influence](#) across the continent, while relations with the US have deteriorated under Donald Trump's second presidency. For the EU today, Brexit looks less like the defining event of the past decade than one crisis among many that have reshaped how the EU sees itself.

The most important direct consequence of Brexit may be the disintegration that did not happen. When British voters chose to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum, there were fears of a domino effect – that one exit might lead to the unravelling of the whole union. Yet the opposite happened during the withdrawal negotiations. A shared interest in safeguarding the single market and the EU's other achievements held the remaining 27 member-states together. Rarely, if ever, [had they been so united](#).

Brexit also reminded many Europeans of the value of membership. [Public support for EU membership](#) – though not necessarily deeper integration – has risen in most member-states. The political chaos in Britain and the economic costs of Brexit have also changed the views of most of Europe's far-right parties about the merits of leaving the union. Many parties that once entertained the prospect of following Britain out of the EU no longer advocate exit. With notable exceptions, including Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, the far-right increasingly seeks not to dismantle the EU but to govern and reshape it along more illiberal lines.

Brexit has, however, altered the [balance of power within the union](#). Britain was one of the 'big three' member-states and often the partner of choice for economically liberal

and/or Atlanticist governments. Its departure increased the relative influence of France and Germany, with many of Britain's former allies turning increasingly to Berlin. It also gave rise to smaller coalitions – 'minilateral' groups – within EU politics. Some of these groupings predate Brexit, but they acquired greater influence after the UK's departure. The Visegrád Four, the fiscally conservative 'Frugal Five' and the Nordic-Baltic Eight have each sought, in different ways, to amplify their collective interests. In the past, many of their members might have worked with – or even through – London, not least during negotiations over the EU budget.

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More recently, Russia's war against Ukraine and growing tensions with the US have encouraged the use of flexible formats, only partly tied to EU institutions. One reason is the will to involve the UK, which can no longer participate in EU decision-making as it once did. In foreign, security and defence policy, the [traditional 'E3'](#) – France, Germany and the UK – has seen a resurgence as an important channel. Wider configurations, such as the 'E5' or Weimar Plus, have brought together France, Germany, Poland, and the UK,

sometimes joined by Italy or Spain, alongside representatives of the EU and/or NATO. These groups have become important conduits for co-ordinating common European positions on major foreign-policy issues.

The partial replacement of UK positions by groups of smaller member-states also meant that Brexit did not lead to a fundamental unblocking of European integration. The UK was often the most visible opponent of closer integration, even if at times it wielded only a symbolic veto. But on many issues, other European governments were content to hide behind British objections. After Brexit, some member-states such as the Netherlands have taken a more prominent role themselves.

There are two notable initiatives that the British government would probably have blocked or significantly altered had the UK remained a member. The first is the [Covid-era Recovery and Resilience Fund](#), financed through large-scale common borrowing that provided grants and loans to member-states, enabled by a Franco-German political compromise. The second is the expansion of the EU's role in defence. This includes joint ammunition initiatives and the [SAFE initiative](#), the €150 billion loan programme to support national defence spending and common procurement. The UK might have supported the broad objective of strengthening European defence, but it would probably have resisted giving the European Commission a large role in doing so.

In other respects, the irony is that the EU has become more like Britain – and Britain more

like the EU. The rightward shift in European politics has led the union to harden its approach on asylum and migration policy, including agreement to establish 'return hubs' in third countries for people with no right to remain on the EU's territory.

On economic policy, the EU has been busy negotiating new free-trade agreements as it seeks to diversify its relationship in response to Trump's tariffs. The EU-Mercosur trade agreement has been provisionally applied, while negotiations with India and Australia have concluded early this year. The EU's competitiveness agenda also increasingly focuses on simplifying regulation, reducing business red tape and deepening the single market – priorities championed by successive British governments pre-2016.

Brexit, in the end, did not reconfigure the EU so much as reveal its resilience. The union remains prone to disagreement and frequently slow to act. But it has also become more adaptable and flexible in confronting many of the crises on its doorstep. In an age of renewed great-power competition, the EU remains the preferred vehicle for Europe's mostly small countries seeking to defend their interests by working together.

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