

What is Brexit? A made-up word: Britain + exit = Brexit

A Pre-reading (or before details are outlined)

Take a moment to consider what details the negotiators would have to discuss before drawing up a post-Brexit agreement.

B Now read the text and answer the questions at the end.

Brexit is the name that was quickly connected with the United Kingdom's decision to withdraw from the European Union (EU) after the referendum on 23rd June 2016. It was a very close decision, 51.89% voted to 'leave'. There was a strong turnout of voters: 72.2% of the voting population voted. It still isn't clear if the decision would have been different if more people in important areas (London for example) of the UK had voted. Unfortunately, on polling day there were extreme weather conditions and flooding in London and the south east of England, preventing voters from reaching polling stations.



The United Kingdom joined Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands to become a member of the EU on 1st January 1973. The other countries had joined together in 1951 to cooperate economically. There is now a total of 28 Member States – from midnight on 30th March 2019 CET (11 p.m. 29th March 2019 GMT) there will only be 27 as this is when the UK officially leaves the EU. Currently the UK is still a full member of the EU and all the rights and obligations fully apply both in and to the UK until it leaves.

Nowadays it isn't easy to become a member of the EU. A country has to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria (the conditions for membership) before it applies for membership. These criteria include a free-market economy, a stable democracy and the acceptance of all EU legislation, including the euro. Once these conditions are met, a country must implement the EU rules and regulations. There is a long period of negotiations during which time the country is supported financially, technically and administratively before they finally become a member of the EU. There are still countries waiting to join the EU, for example Turkey and the Balkan states of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania. Turkey first applied to join in 1987. They have now been promised that their application will be reviewed in return for helping to deal the crisis of migrants in Europe.

There is a group of countries within the EU known as the Eurozone. This is the name given to the 19 countries whose official currency is the euro. The UK never replaced the pound with the euro to become one of the Eurozone countries.

The UK never became a member of the Schengen border-free area either. This is an area of Europe without internal borders. Citizens, business people and tourists within this area can move freely between the member countries without having to show their passports at the borders. Although internal borders have been removed, external borders have more tightened controls. Most EU countries in mainland Europe are included in this area, not the UK.

Although the citizens of the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU on 23rd June 2016, the UK didn't formally notify the European Council of its intention to leave the EU by triggering Article 50

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of the Lisbon Treaty until 29th March 2017. This states that any Member State may leave the Union. It has to notify the European Council of its intention to leave and the Union then negotiates and concludes an agreement with that state about its withdrawal.

The day after the referendum (24th June 2016) the President of the European Parliament, the President of the European Council, the Holder of the Presidency of the Council of the EU and the President of the European Commission met in Brussels to discuss the outcome of the United Kingdom referendum and released the following statement:

“In a free and democratic process, the British people have expressed their wish to leave the European Union. We regret this decision but respect it. This is an unprecedented situation, but we are united in our response. We will stand strong and uphold the EU’s core values of promoting peace and the well-being of its peoples. The Union of 27 Member States will continue. The Union is the framework of our common political future. We are bound together by history, geography and common interests and will develop our cooperation on this basis. Together we will address our common challenges to generate growth, increase prosperity and ensure a safe and secure environment for our citizens. The institutions will play their full role in this endeavour.

We now expect the United Kingdom government to give effect to this decision of the British people as soon as possible, however painful that process may be. Any delay would unnecessarily prolong uncertainty. We have rules to deal with this in an orderly way. [...]

As regards the United Kingdom, we hope to have it as a close partner of the European Union in the future. We expect the United Kingdom to formulate its proposals in this respect. Any agreement, which will be concluded with the United Kingdom as a third country, will have to reflect the interests of both sides and be balanced in terms of rights and obligations.”

A month after the UK notified the European Council of its intention to leave the EU, the European Council adopted guidelines which define the framework for negotiations and set out the EU’s positions and principles. Michel Barnier represents the 27 EU countries as the chief negotiator. His team at the European Commission coordinates the work on all the strategic, operational, legal and financial issues related to the negotiations.



The first phase of negotiations focused on citizens’ rights, the financial settlement, the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and other issues important to the separation of the UK from the EU. On 15th December 2017 enough progress had been reached so that the negotiations moved onto the second phase. The important details of this phase concerned the position of the EU27 (the name given to the remaining EU countries) during the transition period. They wanted more progress in the areas that were focused on in phase one. A third phase in the negotiations (finalised on 6th July 2018), led to a comprehensive and detailed proposal for the relationship between the UK and the EU after the exit in March 2019. Concerns were again raised by the General Affairs Council about the withdrawal agreement and also about the progress not being made on the Northern Ireland/Ireland solution.

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Here are some comments from people, reflecting what Brexit means to them:

English employee of the European Commission in Brussels

No one knows what will happen from 30th March 2019 to people from the UK who work here. No one can give us any answers. When our contracts were drawn up, a country leaving the EU wasn't something that was considered a real possibility. There is no clearly written paragraph that makes our situation clear. None of us will have jobs as the country we come from isn't part of the EU anymore and we therefore cannot work for the EU or European Commission any more. Will we get redundancy money? Will we be offered a job back home? What will happen to our families? Our children attend European Schools in Brussels, but they can only stay in these schools if we pay the fees. Without a job that isn't possible. EU Commissioner for Budget and human Resources, Günther Oettinger, tried to answer our questions at a meeting attended by over 500 UK employees. He made a very good speech in English and explained what he could, but even he was frustrated about how little he could tell us. I'm British, married to a German, living in Belgium and working for Europe. After Brexit none of these things will help me or my family. I fear I will be unemployed, will have to find a new school for my daughter's last 2 years of education and will have no reason to carry on living in Brussels, if it is at all possible. What were people thinking when they voted 'leave'? Naturally I wasn't allowed to vote as I have been living outside of the UK for too long.

Visitor from London to the Eden Project, Cornwall

I overheard a couple of employees talking about the referendum when I visited the Eden Project in Cornwall while on holiday. At that time, I hadn't decided which way to vote so I was interested in what they were saying. They were both very adamant that they were both going to vote 'leave'. They were fed up of being 'ruled by Europe' and the UK always having to 'bow down to the rules passed in Brussels that had to be followed by the whole of Europe'. It started me thinking about what things they meant. The first thing that came to mind, as I was on holiday in Cornwall, were the fishing quotas. I remember visiting Cornwall as a child and seeing all the fishing boats and markets. Maybe it just seemed so many because I was young but there certainly didn't seem to be so many now. Europe passed a law as to how much fish is allowed to be fished by each country. For countries without a coastline or an important fishing industry – like Luxemburg or Austria – that's not so much of a problem, but the United Kingdom ... an island ... is a different story. So maybe these people at the Eden Project were right, then something caught my eye ... information about where the financial backing for the Eden Project comes from. It is financed by money from the EU. Did the employees think their decision through? If the UK doesn't belong to the EU, there will be no money to finance the Eden Project and they will automatically be unemployed. I wonder if they knew this?

Retired couple from Southwest England

Since the UK joined there's been nothing but problems. We had to take on the European laws and follow what the rest of Europe told us to do. We lost our personality and our Britishness. I think the best we can do is leave the EU. We can then make our own decisions and don't have to do as we are told. We don't have to give the EU our money to finance projects that don't help our country and we can call ourselves British and not European. Not that I ever did; I was always British. At least we didn't use the euro and kept the pound, that is one less problem when we leave. It was clear to us from the beginning that we would vote to leave the EU and we are very glad that we were given the chance to choose.

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Boris Johnson, former Foreign Secretary

I have always been very clear on my position of Brexit. It is just so frustrating that Theresa May can't get things down on paper and lead the UK through this. The UK isn't even trying to do things properly and is not thinking about the best for the UK. I resigned over the compromise made at Chequers in July, along with David Davis, the Brexit secretary, because we just couldn't be part of the discussions any more when they were going nowhere. It was clear that all these so-called negotiations were only going to lead to a victory for Brussels. I liken the discussions between the current Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab and Michel Barnier to a boxing match. It's clear that the EU will come out the winners, leaving the UK lying in the middle of the ring with the 12 EU stars circling around their head. After the summer break, Parliament will return this week and time is running out. So far all that has been agreed is to pay 40 billion pounds of taxpayers' money for nothing, just to try and stay in the single market. It's disgusting and slowly we have lost control of all our senses.

C Comprehension

- 1 What is included in the Copenhagen criteria?
- 2 What is in Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty?
- 3 Look at the different comments. How do the people feel and why?

D Analysis

- 1 Draw a timeline of events. Starting when the UK joined the EU in 1973.
- 2 What can you find out about the Schengen agreement? Find out when it was signed and what important matters it settles. Which paragraphs are relevant to both Brexit and also to you living in Germany? How does it affect your movement in the EU?

E Beyond the text

- 1 Find the dates that each member country was accepted into the EU.
- 2 Why do you think the United Kingdom didn't become part of the Schengen border-free area or the Eurozone?
- 3 Have a debate and vote in class. Decide if you would vote to stay in the EU if you were British and could have voted in the referendum on the 23rd June 2016 (or optional: if there was a referendum in Germany). You need someone to head the debate, a group for 'leave' and a group for 'stay'. The two groups need to prepare their arguments so that they can persuade the others to vote in their direction.
- 4 Search the internet for a map of the United Kingdom showing how people voted. Collect ideas about why people in the different areas voted how they did. Think about industry, lifestyle, jobs, income and the geographical areas.

Lösungen/Lösungsvorschläge

To help you with the Comprehension and Analysis questions, here are the answers which can be found in the text. The class can also do research on the internet to find more information. The links below can help students with all the tasks.

C Comprehension

- 1 What is included in the Copenhagen criteria?

The Copenhagen criteria include a free-market economy, a stable democracy and the acceptance of all EU legislation, including the euro.

- 2 What is in Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty?

Article 50 states that any Member State may leave the Union. It has to notify the European Council of its intention to leave, and the Union then negotiates and concludes an agreement with that state about its withdrawal.

- 3 Look at the different comments. How do the people feel and why?

Everything is very unclear: both before the referendum and now.

They are unhappy: about being in the EU, things that have happened while there, the things the government have said and done.

They are frightened: they don't know where it will lead the country and what the results for everyone will be.

D Analysis

- 1 Draw a timeline of events. Starting when the UK joined the EU in 1973.

Info for timeline:


UK joined EU 01.01.1973; Referendum 23.06.2016; the President of the European Parliament, the President of the European Council, the Holder of the Presidency of the Council of the EU and the President of the European Commission met in Brussels to discuss the outcome of the United Kingdom referendum 24.06.2016; UK triggers Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty 29.03.2017; the European council adopted guidelines which define the framework for negotiations and set out the EU's positions and principles 29.04.2017; second phase of negotiations started 15.12.2017; third phase of negotiations 06.07.2018; UK will leave EU 30.03.2019 (29.03.2019 GMT)

Further information on the topic

General information about Brexit:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brexit> 

Information about EU countries:


https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries_en 

Special coverage on Brexit:

https://europa.eu/newsroom/highlights/special-coverage/brexit_en 

Teacher's page

Brexit negotiations:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/brexit-negotiations_en 

European parliament Brexit news:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/brexit> 

Publications on Brexit:

<https://publications.europa.eu/en/web/general-publications/brexit> 

News timeline on Brexit:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-uk-after-referendum/> 

Information about proposals made in third phase of negotiations:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5931823/David-Davis-resigns-Brexit-Secretary.html> 