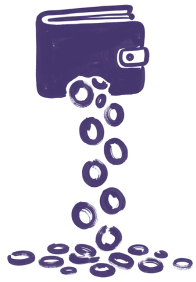
# Can a country leave the EU – and what does it cost?

## Yes – Article 50 of the EU treaty gives every member the right to leave. Britain used it; the bill is still being counted.



The EU is, on this point, unusual among unions: exit is legal, written down, and tested once. Both facts – the open door and the price of walking through it – deserve plain statement.

### The mechanics

Since 2009, Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union has provided a formal exit. The process: a member notifies the European Council of its intention; a two-year window opens to negotiate a withdrawal agreement (approved by qualified majority plus the European Parliament – the leaver needs no one's permission to go); when the window closes, treaties simply cease to apply, deal or no deal. Extensions require all remaining members to agree unanimously.

Before 2020, the clause had never been used by a full member. Greenland – an autonomous territory of Denmark, not a member state – negotiated out in 1985 over fish; Algeria exited by becoming independent of France in 1962. The United Kingdom is the only country to have done the real thing: referendum June 2016, notification March 2017, three extensions, departure on 31 January 2020.

So the door exists and it opens. The interesting question is what's on the other side.

### The one case study

Britain entered the experiment as close to a best case as a leaver gets: a large G7 economy, its own globally traded currency, London's financial machine, and deep trade relationships to fall back on. Six years of measured results, from sources with no stake in the referendum:

- The UK's own fiscal watchdog, the OBR, builds its forecasts on Brexit reducing long-run productivity by **4 %** and trade intensity by **15 %** relative to remaining – assumptions it reviewed in 2025 and kept.
- An NBER study published this year puts GDP per capita **6–8 % below** the remain counterfactual by 2025, with investment down 12–18 % and employment down 3–4 %.
- Goldman Sachs' ten-year retrospective lands in the same 6–8 % range; NIESR projects 5–6 % by 2035.

For scale: a 6 % GDP shortfall is roughly the UK's entire annual defense and education budgets combined, recurring. No serious estimate finds a net gain; the argument among economists is between "significant" and "very significant."

### What the leaver got – stated fairly

Britain regained its trade policy and used it (CPTPP accession, bilateral deals). It ended free movement and redesigned migration on its own terms – intake, notably, went up, but under British rules. It stopped paying into the EU budget, a real if modest saving of roughly a quarter-percent of GDP. And it holds formal regulatory freedom, exercised sparingly for a structural reason worth understanding: when your largest market writes rules for 450 million people next door, diverging from them costs you twice – once in lost access, once in duplicated compliance. Sovereignty on paper met the gravity of scale in practice.

That is the honest ledger: real symbolic and legal gains, purchased at a measurable, compounding economic price – paid mostly by people who were promised the opposite.

## What it means for everyone else

Brexit settled an argument the EU could never settle about itself. Exit is not a hostage situation – the door works, the union survived a G7 economy's departure intact, and no member has moved toward the door since. Polling across the continent shifted notably pro-membership after 2016, and in Britain, consistent majorities now tell pollsters the decision was wrong. The one tested answer to "can a country leave?" turned out to be: yes, freely – and the price tag is now public knowledge, which may be the most consequential thing the experiment produced. Whether the remaining members draw closer together is the sequel currently being negotiated.

All questions →

FREQUENTLY ASKED

**What is Article 50?**

The EU treaty clause (since 2009) giving every member the right to withdraw. The leaver notifies the European Council, and a two-year negotiation window opens – extendable only by unanimous agreement.

**Which countries have left the EU?**

One: the United Kingdom, on 31 January 2020. Greenland, an autonomous Danish territory, withdrew in 1985, and Algeria left on independence in 1962 – but no other full member state has ever exited.

**How much has Brexit cost the UK?**

The government's own forecaster assumes 4 % lower long-run productivity and 15 % lower trade intensity. Academic and market estimates (NBER, Goldman Sachs, NIESR) put GDP per capita 6–8 % below a remain scenario by 2025.

**What did the UK actually get back?**

Real things: its own trade policy (it joined the CPTPP), an end to free movement, no budget contributions, and formal regulatory freedom – used sparingly, since diverging from your largest market is itself costly.

**Could a leaver later rejoin?**

Legally yes – via the standard accession process, Article 49, with all 27 members' consent and likely tougher terms (no old opt-outs guaranteed). Politically it's a decade-scale project; the UK debate has only begun circling it.

SOURCES

- Article 50 TEU (Lisbon Treaty, 2009); Article 49 TEU (accession)
- OBR Brexit analysis (4 % long-run productivity, 15 % trade intensity assumptions; July 2025 review)
- NBER, Measuring Brexit's Economic Toll (2026): GDP per capita −6–8 %, investment −12–18 %
- Goldman Sachs, The Economic Cost of Brexit, Ten Years On (June 2026); NIESR (April 2025)
- Greenland withdrawal treaty, 1985; UK Withdrawal Agreement, 2020