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The future is not rejoin — it's rebuild

The EU-UK Summit proved one truth: some battles can only be won together

When Michel Barnier first addressed the British public afte r the signing of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement in 2021, he was clear-eyed: 'This is a divorce, and nobody should be happy after a divorce... The EU is not a prison. You can leave, but there are consequences.' Four years on, those consequences are all too visible.

'Bregret' has entered the Westminster lexicon, with a mounting body of evidence pointing to Brexit's economic toll. The UK's Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates a 4 per cent long-term GDP loss due to reduced productivity and trade friction. Trade volumes are expected to be 15 per cent lower than had the UK remained in the EU. For many Britons, the change became personal when they found themselves queuing at EU borders with travellers they once considered 'foreign.'

In the lead-up to the 2019 general election, 63 per cent of voters listed Brexit as a top national issue. By 2024, that number had fallen to just 7 per cent. A mere 21 per cent of the public now believes Labour's victory grants it a mandate to rejoin the EU, while 51 per cent explicitly reject that idea. However, 45 per cent support closer ties without rejoining the Single Market or Customs Union — an opportunity Labour has cautiously embraced.

It is on this fragile consensus that Keir Starmer and Ursula von der Leyen have begun crafting a more functional relationship. The EU-UK Strategic Partnership Summit on 19 May marked a significant departure from years of acrimony. The mood in Lancaster House was noticeably different. 'Look forward, not back,' said European Council President António Costa, calling for solidarity in the face of global challenges. Von der Leyen was even more emphatic: 'We are turning the page. We are opening a new chapter.'

This renewed cooperation is driven by necessity. Russia's war on Ukraine, tensions with an unpredictable US administration, and the urgency of energy security have realigned European priorities. The UK and EU now

find themselves on the same side of several existential issues — security, climate, migration, and energy.

Storytelling and institutional commitment

Progress has already been made. The Windsor Framework resolved contentious issues around the Northern Ireland Protocol. The UK has rejoined Horizon Europe. At the May summit, a roadmap was laid out for deepening cooperation without reopening the wound of EU membership.

But this process is not without challenges. Both sides must explain the long-term benefits of this new relationship to their publics. Trust remains fragile. And while grand economic prizes like full market access for services remain out of reach, the summit delivered real gains. The SAFE Defence Pact allows the UK closer cooperation on Ukraine, shared planning, and access to the EU defence fund —effectively reintegrating it into Europe's security architecture. Energy cooperation will see the UK participate in the EU electricity market, potentially lowering bills and securing infrastructure against external threats. Emission trading systems will be linked, creating a shared path to Net Zero and levelling the environmental playing field. A new SPS deal simplifies trade in agri-foods, reducing costs for farmers, exporters, and consumers, especially in Northern Ireland. Reinstatement of ERASMUS+ offers opportunities for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds hit hard by Brexit. Tariff-free trade in steel – unexpected but vital – was shaped in part by US trade pressures and may prove critical for the British steel sector and Europe's defence supply chains. Enhanced cooperation on migration and justice will bolster cross-border policing, data sharing, and joint efforts against smuggling networks.

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Each step reflects a pragmatic understanding: the UK and EU are better off working together than apart. Still, these advances must be communicated effectively. If the public doesn't feel tangible improvements, the risk of backlash remains. Agreements alone won't build trust — implementation, transparency, and visible benefits will.

This is where progressive leadership must step up. In 2016, the Brexit campaign mastered the digital battlefield. Now, progressives must reclaim it. That means telling real stories — of farmers navigating new trade

deals, of students regaining study opportunities, of families seeing lower energy bills. Narratives should focus less on abstract growth and more on everyday wins: cheaper groceries, cheaper energy, more jobs.

Targeted messaging is key. Under-45s, urban professionals, students, and skilled workers are open to nuance. TikTok and other platforms can elevate relatable voices. University events, town halls, and local business forums can personalise the EU-UK partnership.

Coordination matters too. Progressive parties across the UK and EU should share strategy and messaging via platforms like the Progressive Alliance. Materials need to be localised, showing regional impacts of lost cooperation and potential gains from renewed ties.

And let's be honest about the risks. Signing deals raises expectations — sometimes unrealistically so. Delays or missteps could spark renewed disillusionment. Hardliners are poised to exploit any gap between promise and delivery. That's why storytelling must be paired with institutional commitment: joint committees, monitoring systems, and dispute resolution frameworks must be set up quickly and functionally.

There are deeper structural questions as well. Can progressives avoid reigniting a 'Brexit identity' debate? Will the EU remain unified in resisting the far right? Can the UK find a sustainable position between the US and the EU?

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So far, Starmer has managed to tread that tightrope. But EU leaders also remain wary. Both sides are guarding against 'cherry picking' — seeking advantages without obligations. The way forward will require realism, persistence, and a clear-eyed understanding that negotiation and compromise is the foundation of democracy.

In the end, Europe is under pressure — from within and without. Cooperation isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. That message should be central to any progressive strategy. Integration today isn't about idealism; it's about resilience. Shared energy grids, secure supply chains, and coordinated defence are not political luxuries — they're economic and geopolitical imperatives.

Labour must make the case not for going back to the EU, but for going forward with it. That means abandoning the old rhetoric of betrayal or triumph and building something new — a durable, functional

relationship based on mutual respect and shared values.

The divorce is final. What we need now is a cooperative future for the next generation. Let's not leave the lawyers of separation in charge. Let's give the storytellers, the strategists, and the bridge-builders a chance to shape what comes next.



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