

The United Kingdom has been a reluctant member of the European Union since it joined in 1973, and in June 2016 its people voted to leave the Union after a long troubled relationship with the organization.

In the aftermath of the vote, it became clear that the vote to leave was part of a wider backlash by those who feel disadvantaged by the globalization of the economy.

As the European power with the biggest former colonial empire, most Britons have a sense of their country as one of the world's great nations. As an island, they see themselves as somewhat separate from others. And as a winner of World War II, they have strong feelings about the ambitions of other European nations, and their relationship to their ally the United States of America.

These factors all help explain why the UK was not a founding member of the EU, didn't join until 1973, and has sought "opt-outs" of certain EU policies throughout their membership, especially from the Euro currency.

The 2016 vote for Brexit was the third time Britons have voted on whether to be a member of the EU and its predecessor organizations. Individual political parties have changed their positions and been deeply divided over what the UK's relationship with the EU should be.

The UK media, especially tabloid newspapers, have often been hostile to the European Commission, based in Brussels, Belgium, which drafts EU laws.

As the powers of the EU have expanded, and as the size of the EU also expanded to include countries previously aligned with the Soviet Union, the UK's relationship became increasingly tense.

The rise of the UK independence party, the skepticism of many Conservative party figures, and the ambivalence of many Labour party figures, has in recent years combined to weaken the support base for EU membership in the UK.

These forces all came to an abrupt resolution in the 2016 referendum on whether the UK should remain in the EU.

More than 17 millions Britons voted to Leave, beating out the expectations of most observers, opinion pollsters and financial market voices who had all expected a narrow victory for "Remain".

The immediate consequences included the resignation of the pro-EU Prime Minister David Cameron and the UK's European Commissioner in Brussels, Jonathan Hill.

The UK government must now decide how it wants to act on the vote, under the leadership of Theresa May who was selected to replace David Cameron.

The most controversial issue is likely to be what migration rights are granted to EU citizens in the UK's new relationship with the EU. Many Britons feel angry at the impact the large numbers of migrants from EU countries have had on their society and economy, for example, on the wages of low-skilled British workers who now compete with people from lower-wage EU countries who have better skills.

This trend is most notable outside of the capital, London, where there are fewer immigrants. London remains one of the most diverse and successful cities in the world.

If the UK follows through the vote to leave the EU, the process to both leave and establish a new trade relationship with the EU could take between two and 10 years to be completed.