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The Issues of Brexit

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Brexit is a word that is used as a shorthand way of saying the UK leaving the EU - merging the words 'Britain' and 'exit' to get Brexit. A referendum was held on Thursday 23 June, 2016, to decide whether the UK should leave or remain in the European Union. Leave won by 51.9 % to 48.1 %. The referendum turnout was 71.8 %, with more than 30 million people voting.

Britain was (and still remains) a part of the European Union. The European Union – often known as the EU – is an economic and political partnership involving 28 European countries. It began after World War Two to foster economic cooperation, with the idea that countries which trade together were more likely to avoid going to war with each other. It has since grown to become a "single market" allowing goods and people to move around, basically as if the member states were one country. It has its own currency, the euro, which is used by 19 of the member countries, its own parliament and it now sets rules in a wide range of areas.

If to speak about certain dates, the UK had been due to leave the EU on 29 March 2019, two years after it started the exit process by invoking Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty. But the withdrawal agreement reached between the EU and UK has been rejected three times by UK MPs (Members of Parliament). As things stand now, the UK is due to leave the European Union at 23:00 GMT on 31 October 2019. If the UK

and EU ratify the withdrawal agreement before then, the UK will leave on the first day of the following month.

But as every process Brexit can be cancelled. Stopping Brexit would require a change in the law in the UK, something neither the government nor the main UK opposition parties want to do at this point. The European Court of Justice ruled on 10 December 2018 that the UK could cancel the Article 50 Brexit process without the permission of the other 27 EU members, and remain a member of the EU on its existing terms, provided the decision followed a “democratic process”, in other words, if Parliament voted for it.

Brexit can also be delayed. Theresa May has said she wants the UK to leave the EU as soon as possible, if possible by 22 May, so the UK will not have to take part in the European Parliament elections taking place across Europe that month. The EU has said the Brexit process should not be extended again beyond 31 October 2019, but legally speaking another extension could happen if all EU countries, including the UK, agree to it.

As Brexit is the first precedent in the history of the country's withdrawal from the EU, there remain many issues of concern to ordinary Britons, for example:

“Would trade with the EU continue?”

Yes. But without an agreement on trade, the UK would trade with the EU under World Trade Organization rules.

“Will Britons need visa to travel to the EU?”

No. Under the Brexit deal, EU citizens and UK nationals will continue to be able to travel freely with a passport or identity card until the end of the transition period in December 2020. After this period ends, the European Commission has offered visa-free travel for UK nationals coming to the EU for a short stay, as long as the UK offers the same in return. British citizens will, however, have to pay €7 (£6.30) every three years

to travel to EU countries, because of a new security system for countries in the passport-free Schengen zone.

“Will the UK be able to rejoin the EU in the future?”

The UK would have to start from scratch with no rebate, and enter accession talks with the EU. Every member state would have to agree to the UK re-joining. But with elections looming elsewhere in Europe, other leaders might not be generous towards any UK demands. New members are required to adopt the euro as their currency, once they meet the relevant criteria.

“How much has Brexit cost so far?”

The £39bn "divorce bill" will cover things like pension payments to EU officials, the cost of relocating London-based EU agencies and outstanding EU budget commitments. But the calculation of an exact UK share will depend on exchange rates, on interest rates, on the number of financial commitments that never turn into payments, and more.

“Will the EU still use English?”

Yes. There will still be 27 other EU states in the bloc, and others wanting to join in the future, and the common language tends to be English.

“And what happens now?”

The UK could leave earlier if a withdrawal agreement has been ratified by MPs. The country must now take part in European elections on 23 May – if it did not the UK would have to leave the EU on 1 June without a deal. The UK was originally due to leave on 29 March. The first extension shifted that date to 12 April. But now the UK now has just over six months to decide what it wants to do. Government ministers are continuing talks with Labour leaders to try to find a compromise deal. If they can agree, MPs will be given a chance to vote on the deal. If not, a range of alternative options will be put to them instead.

Meanwhile, European Council President Donald Tusk said there was a 20 to 30 % chance Brexit would not happen. Mr. Verhofstadt, who is the European Parliament's Brexit coordinator said the Brexit process so far "had done more damage than has ever been predicted" and that "people can change their opinion".

“What do ‘SOFT’ and ‘HARD’ Brexit mean?”

These terms are used during debate on the terms of the UK's departure from the EU. There is no strict definition, but they are used to refer to the closeness of the UK's relationship with the EU post-Brexit. So, "hard" Brexit could involve the UK refusing to compromise on issues like the free movement of people or having to give up hopes of free trade arrangements. A "soft" Brexit means Britain remains a member of the single market and has to accept the free movement of people as a result of that.

Besides setting a precedent for being the first member to officially leave the European Union, the reason why Brexit is such a big deal is that we just don't know how it will turn out yet. It's a big, dramatic move that will take years to complete; years of shifts that will impact the pound and European markets. It will certainly make the UK countries seem less hospitable to new immigrants. One thing to note is that Britain's economy is strong enough that no one needs to expect a sudden collapse.

References:

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