Majority of Brexit voters ‘would accept free movement’ to access single market

Peter Walker, The Guardian, 12 December 2024

A majority of Britons who voted to leave the EU would now accept a return to free movement in exchange for access to the single market, according to a cross-Europe study that also found a reciprocal desire in member states for closer links with the UK.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Donald Trump’s election as US president had “fundamentally changed the context” of EU-UK relations, the report by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) thinktank said.

“There is a remarkable consensus on both sides of the Channel that the time is ripe for a reassessment of EU-UK relations,” it concluded, with closer relations being the most popular option in every country surveyed – and public opinion on the question well ahead of government stances.

Based on polling of more than 9,000 people across the UK and the EU’s five most populous countries – Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Poland – in the weeks after Trump’s election win in November, the ECFR study found the strongest enthusiasm for renewed ties were in Britain.

Perhaps the most striking finding was that 54% of Britons who voted leave, including 59% of voters in “red wall seats”, said in exchange for single market access they would now accept full free movement for EU and UK citizens to travel, live and work across borders.

This could be because the surge in net migration to the UK after 2016 meant that Brexit was no longer seen by its supporters as the answer on immigration, the report suggested.

Among all UK voters, 68% of respondents would now back free movement in exchange for single market access, with 19% opposed and majority support among supporters of every party apart from Reform UK (44% of whose voters also backed the idea).

A similar percentage of Britons supported a reciprocal youth mobility scheme for 18- to 30-year-olds, seen as a key ask for EU leaders in return for an improved Brexit deal but has so far been resisted by the British prime minister, Keir Starmer.

Given today’s global circumstances, the report said, the UK and EU should “go big and go fast” in restoring links. It added: “The EU and the UK are both very vulnerable to prevailing global events and a reset of relations is the single most effective way to make both sides stronger.”

The report argued that while EU politicians and officials have been sceptical about the idea of offering any special terms to the UK, and Starmer and his government are similarly cautious about pushing for improved ties, public opinion on both sides of the Channel appeared significantly different from those stances.

Among British voters, there was clear support for a closer relationship with the EU, with 55% saying they would back closer links with the bloc, against 10% preferring more distant ties and 22% wanting to keep them as they were now. [...]

“The Brexit-era divisions have faded and both European and British citizens realise that they need each other to get safer. Governments now need to catch up with public opinion and offer an ambitious reset.”