



A moment that changed me Brexit

Anneke Schmidt

Wed 14 Jan 2026 06:55 GMT

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A moment that changed me: the Brexit result came through – and my life in Britain fell apart



📍 Anneke in 2016, after she had finished her teacher training. Photograph: Courtesy of Anneke Schmidt

I had my first teaching job lined up and a mortgage application in process. Now it looked like I would have to return to Germany and start training again from scratch. There were just 72 hours to save my dream of living in the UK

In the early hours of Friday 24 June 2016, the result glowed on my phone: 52%. Barely a majority, but nonetheless a verdict. I lay in my rented bedroom in Devon, still in pyjamas, watching everything I'd planned dissolve. When I saw the headline "UK votes to leave EU", my first thought wasn't political. It was: "What does this mean for me?"

It was the final day of my second school placement, the culmination of my teacher training for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). I'd moved from Germany the year before to train as a Religious Education teacher, convinced I'd found a profession and a place to call home. Where I was from in Germany (Baden-Württemberg), RE meant teaching Protestant children Protestantism or Catholic children Catholicism – separate lessons, separate truths. Here, I could teach all major faiths side by side, invite discussion and let curiosity lead the lesson. In a world pulling itself apart

along religious and cultural lines, that felt like the better approach.

But when I enrolled in the programme, I had no idea a referendum was coming. I'm embarrassed to admit that I'd barely followed British politics, and even as the campaign kept rolling, I couldn't imagine the leave vote winning. Great Britain outside the EU? It sounded like a thought experiment, not a future.

So I kept planning - bought furniture for a house I didn't own, and pictured the years ahead. That morning, I had my first proper teaching job lined up, a mortgage application in progress - and then a sudden, sick sense that it might all vanish in the uncertainty of a country rewriting its terms of belonging.

I drove to school on autopilot. In the staff car park, someone had chalked "Take back control" across the asphalt. Two year 9 boys spotted me in the schoolyard and called out: "Miss! Now you'll have to go home!" They were grinning, as if they'd just won a football match. My subject tutor appeared beside me and wrapped her arms around me without saying a word. Another colleague joined in. That was when it hit me: I'd never really thought of myself as an immigrant, but that morning, I woke up as one - same person, different label, and I hadn't moved an inch.



📷 'It's difficult to explain that sense of freefall' ... Anneke Schmidt Photograph: Courtesy of Anneke Schmidt

Looking back now, nearly a decade later, it's difficult to explain that sense of freefall. Settled status exists. Visa routes have been mapped. But at the time, none of that infrastructure existed. Just a vote, and 3.6 million EU nationals waking up to find the ground had shifted beneath them. I knew I was facing [years of limbo](#).

My personal situation was precarious: the qualification I'd spent a year earning had no value in my country of origin. To teach religion there, I'd need to start over from undergraduate level, study theology for years, then teach the denominational model I'd moved to escape. My BA and MA, both earned through distance learning at British universities, wouldn't count towards that. If I had to go back, I'd be starting from zero.

I spent the rest of the day doing calculations, not mathematical but existential. I knew the teaching job tied me to Britain, while a PhD qualification would be internationally recognised. I wanted to stay in the UK - desperately, actually - but I couldn't risk putting all my eggs in one basket. A PhD would let me "take back control" of my own life, at least.

The application deadline at Exeter University fell that same week: three days to write a research proposal. I'd spent months preparing to be a teacher. Now I was writing my way out in 72 hours.

Luckily, I'd only accepted the teaching post, due to start in September, verbally. I could still pull out, even if it meant breaking a promise. Today, almost 10 years and a global pandemic later, I know the decision was right. I've built a freelance career from home, shaping my own days and direction. My work still centres on learning and connection, though now through research rather than teaching. The freedom of movement I lost legally, I've rebuilt on my own terms.

I've even become a British citizen - which meant surrendering my German passport. Germany had stopped allowing dual citizenship with non-EU countries post-Brexit. The law has since changed back, but I was caught in the window when it didn't, and now it's difficult to regain my German nationality. I don't regret it, though. When I arrived here, I saw myself as an EU citizen living in an EU country. Now, neither category applies. [Brexit](#) transformed my sense of self. I had to actively choose Britain over Germany, and while I may always remain German by culture, I've become British by conviction.

But the referendum ruptured my sense of belonging. I chose to live in the UK; I speak the language and had the right qualifications. Whenever I hear

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about [anti-asylum protests](#) spreading across the country, I wonder what it feels like to arrive with none of those things, not by choice but by necessity, and to be met with hostility. That is clearly a much more profound kind of limbo.

- This article was amended on 16 January 2026 to clarify that regaining German citizenship would be possible should the applicant meet certain strict criteria; and that the characterisation of RE education related to the region in which the writer grew up, not necessarily to the whole country.

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