

Brixit - towards the European Union without the United Kingdom

The doubts concerning the membership of the United Kingdom in the European Union cause serious changes in the positions presented by the largest British political parties. The Euroskeptics within the Conservative Party, traditionally known for their unfavorable attitude towards the EU, have never been so strong. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), whose leader, Nigel Farage, became widely recognizable for his anti-integration rants in the European Parliament, is consequently developing its political position (this year, a Conservative MEP joined the UKIP). At the same time, the Labour Party - consequently presenting a strongly pro-European position since the reforms of Tony Blair - started taking a Euroskeptical position in different political disputes, driven by its own narrow political interest.

Within the past decades, one could get the impression that the programs of the political parties in the United Kingdom are more pro-European than the preferences declared by its citizens. Currently, the situation is opposite. The British society cannot be objectively (without making a comparison to other member states) considered to be unambiguously Euroskeptical. According to the recent research conducted by the prestigious *YouGov* center, it is possible to divide the British into three even groups on the basis of their attitude towards the European Union: the international optimists, the moderate pragmatists and the nationalist pessimists. Therefore, the outcome of the general referendum concerning the British membership in the EU is not a foregone conclusion.

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The leader of the Labour Party, Ed Miliband, shocked the European political elites when he accused Cameron of the lack of commitment to the EU budget cuts. The failure of Cameron in the voting at the House of Commons concerning the EU budget, when Miliband successfully allied with the strongly Euroskeptical MPs of the Conservative Party, may additionally facilitate the use of the anti-European card by the Labour Party members. Such a political action, however, may be risky in two aspects. Firstly, in relation to the mentioned research by *YouGov*, the electorate of the Labour Party is the only one in which the groups of - as it was stated in the report - international optimists and nationalist pessimists are distributed evenly. The political flirtation with the Euroskeptical Tories may turn out to be unacceptable for some voters of the Labour Party. Even more so because the image of the Conservative Party is more credible when it comes to anti-integration positioning. Secondly, while maintaining such a position, Miliband will consequently be forced to accept the proposition of a referendum concerning the membership of the United Kingdom in the EU. In such a situation it will be necessary to take a clear stance by the Labour Party members - for or against the membership. At the same time, it is difficult to count on the Conservative Party to be the advocate of pro-European views.

The European referendum in the United Kingdom is strictly related to the independence referendum in Scotland, which will most likely take place in 2014. This legitimizes the voices of Euroskeptics, who argue that the British deserve the right to vote with regard to their membership in the European Union in the same way as the Scots have the right to vote for or against their membership in the United Kingdom. One of the circumstances of the Scottish referendum can be considered paradoxical - the political parties supporting the independence of Scotland are keen supporters of the membership of the new country in the European Union. However, according to the generally accepted interpretation of the international law and the declaration of the President of the European Commission, it is not self-evident and will require an accession procedure. Hypothetically, it is possible that, at the same time, the political organization created from the United Kingdom after the secession of Scotland will be establishing the conditions for exiting the European Union, while the independent Scotland will be negotiating its membership in the European Union - which it would lose as a result of the previous secession.

“Brixit” evokes mixed emotions in European capitals. The European Union without the United Kingdom is hard to imagine - this general view was expressed by the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel. In case of the exit scenario, the core of integration would concentrate almost entirely between France and Germany. Undoubtedly, the Union’s ambitions of active external policy would suffer greatly without the British membership. There are, however, completely different voices, which support the withdrawal of the United



Kingdom from the Union. Only then will full and effective integration be possible - it is the British who have been the main “brake” of the development of the European Union for decades, both in the political and economic dimensions.

The attitude of David Cameron towards the membership of the United Kingdom is particularly one-sided. It assumes the freedom of the UK government to choose the platforms of integrations which are beneficial for the country and, as a consequence, in which he wants to participate. Cameron declares the will to maintain the membership in the Union and the participation in the Common Market. However, the conditions for the British membership should be renegotiated in such a way as to restore the “balance of competences”, as the British Prime Minister put it. A special government unit was appointed to determine the final shape of this balance. Its works are supposed to end with a report in 2014. If Cameron wins another parliamentary election, the new model of membership should be subjected to a general referendum in 2015 or 2016. Such a position and the special treatment of the United Kingdom will be difficult to accept for the remaining member states. It is not possible for the Union to achieve economic and political stability while extending the scope of different rates of integration. Moreover, for many British Euroskeptics, the referendum related to the new, limited model of membership is not sufficient. They clearly expect a referendum concerning the EU membership itself, regardless of its nature. It seems that the distribution of political forces within the British parliament is more and more conducive to such a solution and will limit the freedom of action of the British Prime Minister.

Cameron expressed his expectation that a “calm and mature” debate will take place regarding the future of the European Union. However, it does not seem likely - there is no time left for such a debate. Two fundamental EU summits will take place in November and December 2012. They will concern the budget perspective for 2014-2020 and the creation of the Banking Union. The United Kingdom is perceived as the most staunch supporter of far-reaching EU budget cuts. In the face of the events in the House of Commons, Cameron cannot take a different position during the summit. It seems, however, that it will be hard for the British side to find strong allies during the negotiations. Among the political elites of the European countries there dominates clear awareness of the economic crisis as the most significant common danger for European integration - the British government is here perceived to be breaking the rules of European solidarity. The member states may also remember the failure of Cameron during the negotiations over the fiscal pact last year. What is more, the increasing number of questions concerning the future membership of the United Kingdom in the European Union lowers his credibility as a permanent ally during different future political disputes within the Union.



“Brixit” is not the only and not even the greatest current danger for the European Union. It is the crisis in the eurozone and the economic breakdown of many member states which brings into question the stability of the European integration project. However, both of these pessimistic scenarios are interconnected. The British Prime Minister plays a risky political game in circumstances very limiting to his freedom of action - restricted by the events within the British political system and the dynamic changes of the situation inside the European Union. It is possible that as the actual implementation of the “Brixit” project gets closer, the political elites of the United Kingdom will start to show more maturity and evaluate the influence of European integration on the lives of the British in a less one-sided way.

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