

These Weimar Triangle Analyses are a joint publication by the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) and the German Council of Foreign Relations (DGAP). Their purpose is to give the French, Polish, and German points on central questions concerning European politics and European integration.

In this edition, our Weimar Triangle authors elaborate on Brexit from their national points of view as well as on the "national" positions on Britain's potential exit from the Union.

Britain's potential exit from the EU: "They still don't get it"... or do they?

Vivien Pertusot
February 2013

In 1971, French President George Pompidou told the press about the prospect of British membership to the Common Market: "We often acknowledge three qualities amongst others to the English: humor, tenacity, and realism. I sometimes find myself thinking that we are still at the stage of humor." He meant that France was keen to support British membership, but he did not feel the British were committed to the objectives of the Common Market. Today, many French would still largely share this judgment, but it would be inopportune to brush David Cameron's speech¹ away too swiftly.

France was quiet on the "Brexit" issue. It seemed both ancillary – because it was speculative – and a potential headache. Yet, the government ended this period of silence after David Cameron laid out his vision for a reformed EU. Foreign Affairs Minister Laurent Fabius was the most provocative saying² that the British cannot agree to join a football club and then say they want to play rugby in it. More incisive even was Fabius's pledge to British entrepreneurs that he would roll out the red carpet for them if the UK were to exit – a counterpunch to David Cameron's comments³ a few weeks after President Hollande took office. Given the long tradition of gentle and mutual mockery, it would have been surprising if no French official had responded with biting wit – undoubtedly seen as smirky in Britain – about this issue. Nonetheless, François Hollande expressed⁴ his desire to see the UK remain an EU member state.

In many respects, the way France is looking at David Cameron's speech last week is an issue of geometry: Britain cannot have access to an "Europe à la carte," in other words it should embrace the EU as it is or leave. France

Vivien Pertusot heads the Brussels office of the French Institute of International Relations (Institut français des relations internationales - IFRI).

Les opinions exprimées dans ce texte n'engagent que leur auteur.

ISBN : 978-2-36567-131-6
© Tous droits réservés, Paris, Ifri



supports British membership, but will be pragmatic about it. Some member states might be sensitive to David Cameron's predicament of defending EU membership despite loud advocates for an exit. France will not. It is not implausible that France would even call Britain's bluff if it comes down to this in negotiations. To show the French ambivalence vis-à-vis the British membership, a poll says it all: 52 percent of the French would be favorable to a "Brixit."⁵

From afar, what David Cameron wants – something resembling an associate membership – and what France has been advocating for the EU – the development of "a core Europe" although the term does not belong to the official vocabulary – might bear some similarities. Britain is not opposed to some member states integrating further – a kind of "core Europe" – it just does not want to be part of such a core. France would encourage a group of pioneers with the others lagging behind. Where the two rationales depart from each other is that the French rationale implies that everyone should in theory be willing to go the extra mile to catch up with the pioneers. The UK would not feel lagging behind however, just willingly out of the race.

What is more off-putting for the French is that the UK does not want to integrate further, it even wishes to "take powers back", as David Cameron said. This could be a red line for the French. Two fears prompt the French to resist Britain's argument. The first is that they do not see a more flexible Europe as the way forward, especially squarely based on the Single Market. France supports more integration, although the clear definition of what it encapsulates remains a subject of debate in France. The second fear is that the British may actually get support for their vision of the EU's future! David Cameron has delivered a straightforward and clear-ended – though controversial – vision for the future of the EU without preaching its break-up or its becoming a federation. This middle ground rationale – arguably a low middle-ground from the French perspective – challenges other member states, including France and Germany, whose more integrationist views are much less straightforward and clear-ended, to clarify what they want the EU to become. David Cameron's speech may spark some amusement in France, "they still don't get it", but in the longer run, his points about the EU may well trigger at first interest but then actual support.

¹ "EU speech at Bloomberg" David Cameron (British Prime Minister), Speeches and transcripts, The official site of British Prime Minister's Office, 23rd January 2013, <<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/eu-speech-at-bloomberg/>>.

² « Fabius refuse "l'Europe à la carte" demandée par Cameron » Laurent Fabius (French Minister of Foreign Affairs), France Info, 23.01.2013, <<http://www.franceinfo.fr/politique/les-invites-de-france-info/fabius-refuse-l-europe-a-la-carte-demandee-par-londres-869627-2013-01-23#main-content>>.

³ « David Cameron prêt à "déranger le tapis rouge" aux entreprises françaises », La tribune, 19.06.2012, <<http://www.latribune.fr/actualites/economie/union-europeenne/20120619trib000704564/david-cameron-pret-a-deranger-le-tapis-rouge-aux-entreprises-francaises.html>>.

⁴ « Hollande « a manifesté son souhait » que la Grande-Bretagne reste dans l'UE », Le Point, 23.01.2013 <http://www.lepoint.fr/politique/hollande-a-manifeste-son-souhait-que-la-grande-bretagne-reste-dans-l-ue-23-01-2013-1619194_20.php>.

⁵ « Les Français favorables à une sortie de la Grande-Bretagne de l'UE », Le Parisien, 26.01.2013 <<http://www.leparisien.fr/international/les-francais-favorables-a-une-sortie-de-la-grande-bretagne-de-l-ue-26-01-2013-2514875.php>>.

Britain's potential exit from the EU

The Polish point of view

Wojciech Lorenz
February 2013

Wojciech Lorenz is senior research fellow at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych - PISM).

The prospects that Britain might loosen its ties with European Union or even completely leave the club have not been well received by Polish media pundits, experts, and politicians. Not least because Britain was one of only three members to open their labor markets for the new member states after their accession in 2004. Simply put, without politically strong Britain in the heart of the EU, Poland will have less room for manoeuvre in securing its vital interests. And even if EU decision-making were a bit smoother without Britain, a London-less EU will be a weaker player in the international arena.

For Poland, with its history and geographical location, a strong EU is an important pillar of security and a guarantor of economic development. Despite remarkable achievements over the last two decades, Poland still has a long way to go, and a post-Soviet area of potential instability lies just behind its eastern border. Polish GDP per capita is only 65 percent of the EU average and it will take decades for Poles to have an equivalent quality of life. Hence, it is crucial for Poland to build an EU which is based on solidarity, strong economies, and an open-door policy. Steering Europe toward this vision would be easier with Great Britain on board as both countries support further enlargement of the EU and are advocates of liberal economic policies as the main stimulus for growth. Warsaw could build coalitions with London to counterbalance Franco-German initiatives that run counter to Polish interests.

Suggestions that Poland could take Britain's place in the EU are an ego-boost, but Poles are not easily duped by such a vision. Poland's population is half of Britain's and its economy is five times smaller, not to mention Britain's global status, strong military, and leading financial sector. Nevertheless, if Britain loses political influence in the EU and stays outside the main decision making bodies, Poland, as the sixth largest EU economy, may try to fill the vacuum. For this, however, Warsaw will have to adopt the euro and move to the center of political integration. Only then it could take the British place at the table as the staunch supporter of free market and sensible financial policies. It will obviously have to introduce further reforms to boost the economy. And to punch above its weight Warsaw would have to run an ambitious foreign policy that would make it a true representative of the regional partners.

Yet, even such a rise in Polish status would not offset the negative effects of British divorce from EU politics. Poland will remain a mid-size Central European

country with interests that sometimes diverge from the old EU member states. With the new voting system in place that allows current euro member states to push through decisions, and minus the possibility of increasing its leverage through the coalition with London, Poland may be easily subdued by Franco-German motor.

Britain's potential exit from the EU: Germans prove to be less than receptive to British efforts to debate Europe

Almut Möller
October 2012

While UK Foreign Secretary William Hague gave a speech¹ in front of much of Germany's foreign policy establishment in the heart of Berlin this week, a cross-party delegation of members of the House of Commons' Foreign Affairs Committee came to the German capital to mingle with officials, Bundestag members, members of the business community, and political analysts to get a feeling for the direction the EU debate is taking locally.

Both German and British politicians are facing daunting tasks—no less than keeping their nation-states from plunging into insignificance—and coming up with exactly opposite remedies to achieve that: more, and less, Europe, respectively. Nonetheless, there was something quite amusing in the exchange between Brits and Germans on the EU's future. The Germans speak English well enough, but still much seems to be lost in translation.

“We respect the serious and methodical way” in which Germany is tackling the serious EU issues, Secretary Hague said in this week's speech at the Berlin Foreign Policy Forum. “The British debate tends to be rough and raucous. After having worked together for so long we should know enough to accept those differences.” But actually, the problem is that it doesn't feel like it.

A good argument, always elegantly communicated and decorated with some humorous, historical, dramatic, or figurative ornament (or all of the above), is something the Brits can really enjoy and savor. And they are happy to leave unconcluded thoughts hanging to chase another argument whose rhetorical beauty beckons. All of this is quite incompatible with the goal-oriented, highly structured, and narrowly focused German style of discussion. The German arguments might get sentimental when Europe is the topic, but there seems to only ever contain one option, one point.

“There is no alternative!” This has been Chancellor Merkel's mantra in the last months: and what a disappointment. The most powerful leader in Europe, at a crucial point in the history of Europe's nation-states, does not want a debate! I wonder how many of this week's London visitors arrived in Berlin, anxiously

Almut Möller heads the
Alfred von Oppenheim
Center for European Policy
Studies at the German
Council of Foreign
Relations (Deutsche
Gesellschaft für Auswärtige
Politik - DGAP).

exiting the plane with their arguments sharpened, to join an argumentative joust expected to be fierce, controversial, multi-faceted, way ahead of the narrow British EU debate, and, indeed, fun. They must have been sorely disappointed to find that everything is essentially sorted: “more Europe” is the answer. “But,” the Brits must have muttered, “We haven’t even started to indulge in our argument!” It is a short step then for the Brits to console themselves with the thought that they might not want to be part of this continental hara-kiri anyway. Clearly, though, we can count on London for a good fret.

Germans, in return, do not appreciate a debate for the sake of debate at a time when they feel they are burdened by very serious (and expensive) problems, if in the end nothing is really being offered. Secretary Hague said in this week's speech that he wanted “a constructive and serious British contribution to the public debate across Europe about how the EU can be reformed, modernized, and improved.” I reckon that 80 percent of the Germans attending his speech thought a) he is surely being sarcastic, b) he is making fun of us, or c) what he really means is he wants to trigger a debate in order to destroy our Union. Looking at the often ill-informed, surprisingly narrow debates about the EU in the UK, which most Germans there are quite familiar with; one might admit that the 80 percent probably have a point.

Hague's messages weren't exactly received as sent. And so it is very likely that the speech continued something like this in the heads of the German listeners: “This Coalition Government is committed to Britain playing a leading role in the EU but I must also be frank: public disillusionment with the EU in Britain is the deepest it has ever been,” Hague continued. The German audience surely thought: *We know, we know. Get to the point. We are already bored.*

Hague: “People feel that in too many ways the EU is something that is done to them, not something over which they have a say. The way in Britain Lisbon was ratified without any consultation of the voters has played a part in that.” To which the impatient Germans responded in their heads: *Yes, well, we are familiar with that problem. But isn't it a problem that your government and parliament need to address? We are doing our bit here—you need to sort that out at home. Sadly, the German constitution doesn't allow for a referendum, we would really be very happy to do it for the sake of democracy. Why are you talking about Lisbon anyway? We are talking about the future.*

Hague: “People feel that the EU is a one-way process, a great machine that sucks up decision-making from national parliaments to the European level until everything is decided by the EU.” One could picture the Germans whispering along the aisles: *What? This again? Even the Bavarian CSU has given up on this “creeping competencies” line. This is so retro. And everybody knows that the real power these days is in the hands of national governments.*

Hague: “If we cannot show that decision-making can flow back to national parliaments then the system will become democratically unsustainable.” Germans:

Oh yes, very creative. How about coming up with a few more options, just to acknowledge they exist? Strengthening the European Parliament, perhaps? Get national parliaments more involved with the mechanisms already in place?)

Hague: "We need to look afresh at some of the things the EU does." *Hmm. Actually, the German crowd might find this interesting, but only half of it is still listening.*

Hague: "That is why, over the next two years, the British government will be reviewing what the EU does and how it affects us in the United Kingdom." And the German audience-mind: *Couldn't care less. We'll have moved on without you in the meantime.*

¹ "Europe at a crossroads: what kind of Europe do we want?" William Hague (Foreign Secretary UK) at the Körber Foundation Conference in Berlin, 23.10.2012, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/europe-at-a-crossroads-what-kind-of-europe-do-we-want?view=Speech&id=825459182>>.