

Sweden and the UK's deal: For Swedes, the real drama is yet to come

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Sweden has often been regarded as one of the UK's closest partners within the EU, and was predicted to be one of David Cameron's potential allies during his renegotiation. But how is the UK's deal likely to play out in the context of domestic politics in the country? Björn Fägersten writes that the issues the UK made central to its renegotiation, such as the relationship between members of the Eurozone and those remaining outside the single currency, have significant relevance for Sweden. He states that although the Swedish government did not take a strong stance during the negotiations, the result of the referendum could have an important impact on how Swedes judge their own relationship with the rest of Europe.



Sweden's strong interest in avoiding a Brexit, combined with the country's focus on the ongoing migration crisis, which was also part of the agenda at the European Council meeting on 18-19 February, ensured that the Swedish government made little noise during David Cameron's renegotiation. However the [agreement](#) that was reached at the summit will have great significance for Sweden, with the Brexit debate likely to be followed closely in a country that never tires of discussing its own EU relationship.

With the deal still being analysed and the 'leave' and 'remain' campaigns beginning to heat up in the UK, a number of issues stand out from the Swedish perspective. On economic governance, Sweden and the UK share an interest in the rights of those states that are not members of the Eurozone, in addition to protecting the country's banking industry. Meanwhile on the issue of sovereignty, many Swedes are uncomfortable with grand visions of an ever closer union and would be amenable to greater national parliamentary control.

In addition, successive Swedish governments have fought for competitiveness and a more effective EU budget, often with the UK as an ally. Even within the migration and welfare area – where the Swedish government stresses the non-discrimination principle of the common market – Cameron could count on support from a country that is dramatically rethinking its own migration policy amid high levels of immigration. All of the key areas contained within the deal therefore have clear relevance for Sweden's domestic debate over the EU and made the country something of a natural partner for the British Prime Minister.

Paradoxically, however, the salience of these areas was the cause for Swedish silence during the negotiations. The fact that Sweden cares about the same issues as the UK meant that keeping an ally within the club took on more importance than meddling with the details of the deal. Without any symbolic fights to pick in a negotiation that would in any case stop a long way short of revolutionising the UK's relations with the EU, the Swedish government chose to primarily focus instead on the issue of migration, discussed at the margins of the European Council meeting.

Sweden's stake in the referendum

The UK's referendum campaign, as well as the potential scenarios that could follow, will therefore be closely followed in Sweden. In the case of a Brexit, Sweden would be in a substantially more exposed position as a non-Eurozone member, and would have to fight harder for a more competitive Union. There are also fears that it might find the focus of the EU's foreign policy drifting further toward the South rather than the East.

Voices calling for a Swedish withdrawal from the EU have largely been marginalized in the country's parliament since the long Eurosceptic [Green Party](#) altered its stance on the issue. But if the UK were to vote to leave, this debate could reemerge as a more prominent feature of domestic politics. Jonas Sjöstedt, the leader of the [Left](#)

Party, which takes a critical stance on EU issues, has recently argued that the UK could negotiate a fairly attractive Brexit deal following the referendum, which could offer a model for other countries such as Sweden. The combination of a Brexit and failure to address the migration crisis at the EU level would likely strengthen anti-EU sentiments in Sweden considerably.

Finally, it will be difficult for Swedes not to observe the UK debate through the lens of their own rather fractious EU relationship. Sweden joined the club 20 years ago, largely on the basis of transactional reasons. Little love has been accumulated towards the project ever since. Of course, this hasn't stopped the country from being a rather effective negotiator in Brussels, often punching far beyond its weight. But the narrow Yes victory in the 1994 EU referendum, followed by the clear No victory in the 2003 Swedish referendum on adopting the euro, has left the country in a seemingly never ending debate over its status within the EU.

Sweden's relationship with the EU and its policies typically trumps questions of what the EU should be and which policies it should pursue. This tendency is perhaps also something Sweden shares with the UK, and following the Brexit debate, there will be a clear reminder for Swedish politicians of just how toxic these decisions can be for political parties. The now ruling **Social Democrats** were split and wounded during the 2003 referendum, when the then Prime Minister Göran Persson argued for a Yes vote, while his charismatic Minister for Enterprise Leif Pagrotsky was a leading No campaigner.

More than a decade later, Swedish political parties – and particularly the Social Democrats – still have difficulties formulating a clear European vision. There is nevertheless some hope that the British experience will be different and that the UK will be able to settle its European question and get to work. There is no shortage of challenges for the EU, and the faster this long pit stop can end, the better. Perhaps a definitive British answer to the European question might even inspire the Swedes to focus more on substance than form in shaping the country's European policy.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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