

Views on the UK's renegotiation: Russia, Ukraine and Turkey

Britain's forthcoming referendum on its membership of the EU is being followed not only in the EU but also around the world. How might the rest of the world view a British exit from the EU? Building on a [report](#) published in 2014 by the German Council on Foreign Relations, EUOPP has been running a series of views from across the EU of the UK's attempt at a renegotiation. The 2014 report also offered non-EU views of the UK-EU relationship from the United States, Canada, China, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, Brazil, Norway and Switzerland. As part of EUOPP's updated series, compiled by the LSE's [Tim Oliver](#) and written by authors based at universities and research institutions in each country, we turn to three of the EU's neighbours: Russia, Ukraine and Turkey.

- **Russia:** [A new twist for an awkward partnership](#)
- **Ukraine:** [Brexit would damage Ukrainian hopes for a European future](#)
- **Turkey:** [Brexit could pave the way for a new EU-Turkey relationship](#)

Russia: A new twist for an awkward partnership

UK-EU relations have been a constant object of attention among Russian specialists on the EU, European integration, European security and British studies. Ever since the UK joined the EEC back in 1973, and even as early as the 1960s when Britain twice submitted unsuccessful applications for membership after an initial period of resentment, this difficult and sometimes uneasy partnership has been a recurrent topic of discussions. It has been raised many times (for example, see [here](#) and [here](#)) in publications of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences.



Recently the issue has acquired an additional twist against the backdrop of a broader malaise in the EU. If in the past the British inclination to play by its own rules and obtain opt-outs from EU policies was seen as peculiar to bilateral UK-EU relations, now it is looked upon as one of many manifestations that show the EU is in the doldrums. Eurosceptics in Russia use this new rift between London and Brussels as proof that European integration has reached its limits and may begin to crumble.

Euro-optimists point to the history of the EU as a long chain of crises, which have usually been settled, even with a certain added-value outcome. Whereas most specialists believe the UK will keep its place in the EU and that the referendum will produce a majority in support of membership, it is clear that the whole process will be nervous and vulnerable to “black swans”, echoing the history of Scotland's independence referendum. What is clear is that the EU project faces its most difficult period and that London will be more on the side of centrifugal forces than otherwise.

However, it is likely that a catastrophe will not occur. The stamina of the EU would have been severely tested in the case of a Greek ejection from the Eurozone, and it would be substantially damaged if the UK were to leave the project altogether. Still, the UK-EU awkward partnership has a good chance of continuing.

A British vote to remain would push the EU towards a “two-speed Europe”, which can only further marginalise the role of Britain in the EU. In the case of a Brexit the worst that could happen for Brussels would be to make it almost impossible for the EU to claim any leading role in international relations. This is not because Britain is so existentially important (the EU will survive should the British decide to break away) but because the EU project would lose its credibility, dampening the normative power it has long held.

The Russian government has made no official statements on the issue. It is treated as a domestic issue for the UK and the EU and as one more piece of proof that the EU is in a much poorer state of affairs than it wishes to present. Mainstream opinion (especially among specialists on the EU) is that in spite of the current rupture in Russia-EU

relations, the situation sooner or later will improve and the EU will remain Russia's main trading and economic partner.

There are few in Russia who doubt that Britain would be significantly weakened if it left the EU and most think that the whole debate is generated more by British internal politics and short-term political opportunism than by a genuine desire by David Cameron to modernise the EU. In the eyes of Moscow, London and Brussels risk losing out in security and geopolitical terms from drifting apart.

Of course, mirroring the situation in the UK, there is also a lot of populist thinking in Russia, especially keeping in mind the traditional hawkish stance of London towards Moscow, and many would applaud if Britain and the EU split, inflicting damage to one another in the process.

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Ukraine: Brexit would damage Ukrainian hopes for a European future

The possibility Britain could withdraw from the EU is not yet a subject of public discussion in Ukraine. The issue and its implications for Ukraine have not been discussed amongst experts, raised in analytical elaborations or discussed in the media.



The only mention of the topic in the media is often impassive comment on the levels of support for such a move among the British with, at best, a brief outline of the arguments of opponents and supporters of such a step. There is also some discussion of what a Brexit could mean for the EU. At the same time, the British Embassy in Ukraine is one of the most active EU missions when it comes to promoting Ukrainians' support for EU integration. In other words, they extol the benefits of European integration which the British themselves seem uncertain of.

The Ukrainian government also avoids the subject. There have been no serious political statements by the President or Prime Minister. It may be that the Ukrainian government and public have not yet fully understood how a Brexit could challenge the future of a united Europe. In no small part this will be due to the other priorities facing Ukraine today.

Britain and Ukraine face entirely different challenges and threats. While Britain is concerned about its coexistence with the European Union, Ukraine is forced to take care of its very existence as a state. The annexation of Crimea, a Russia-inspired war in the east, a severe economic crisis with the national currency devalued three times so far, and a million and a half internally displaced people, leave Ukrainians uninterested in other important issues on the international agenda.

Most ordinary Ukrainians will perceive Britain's debate about withdrawing from the EU as an odd development. This is because hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians risked their lives during the Revolution in the winter of 2014 so Ukraine could begin to live by European and not corrupt post-Soviet rules. Many of them campaigned under the EU flag, which some in Britain now want to turn their backs on.

For Ukrainians the EU became an embodiment of the future, of moving forward. The alternative – the Customs Union with Russia – represented a movement back to the past, to hopelessness. It was a choice between a dream and nostalgia. This does not make Ukrainians naïve romantics. Most people pragmatically perceive that without a clear alignment with the EU – with its continuous political and financial supervision and support – Ukraine's chances of becoming a modern state with a functioning rule of law are much weaker.

While for Britain the EU is, above all, a market place, the EU for Ukrainians is a source of identity and modernisation.

When some British Eurosceptics argue Britain will manage to protect its sovereignty better by being outside the EU, Ukrainians feel that by being outside the EU their sovereignty will be constantly under threat from Russia.

In Ukraine, a British exit from the EU would become a significant gift to the political forces which, in harmony with Russian propaganda, have spent years trying to discredit the EU in the eyes of Ukrainians and have been inspiring people to hate everything European. If the British vote for a withdrawal, they will take away from Ukraine one of the most important arguments for the EU: that there are lots of countries queuing to enter, while there is no country that wants to leave.

A withdrawal from the EU will not particularly affect relations between Britain and Ukraine. What Britain does for Ukraine today – including assistance in strategic communications for the government and reform of the armed forces – can be done even if Britain is no longer an EU member. Britain outside the EU is also likely to fail to live up to its obligations.

In particular, Britain was one of the signatories of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum which provided Ukraine with security assurances after giving up the world's third largest nuclear arsenal. However, after the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, signatory countries made it clear that the document had no legal force. Britain, and others, effectively abandoned Ukraine's security in the face of an aggressive Russia.

The prospect of Ukrainian membership of the EU might also suffer without Britain. Britain has traditionally supported the idea of Ukraine's EU membership. This has tended to vary, with the UK weary of provoking accusations by opponents of EU enlargement that Britain wants to weaken the European Union by widening it further. Despite this, a Britain inside the EU is obviously better placed to push for Ukrainian membership than a Britain on the outside.

A British exit from the EU would do irreparable damage to the image of both the EU and Britain in Ukraine, weakening the hopes of millions of Ukrainians who hope for a better future – a European one to be precise.

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Turkey: Brexit could pave the way for a new EU-Turkey relationship

The debate within the UK about the future of the country's relationship with the EU is keenly followed in Turkey. This has been especially so since the re-election of David Cameron's Conservative party to government, which ensured a referendum on the topic will now happen.



In principle, Turkey would not want the UK to exit the EU. Its continuing membership is a guarantee that the EU will move forward in the direction of a pro-market community. The UK's presence is also important from the standpoint of helping the EU acquire and consolidate a more strategic vision in the area of a common foreign and security policy.

A possible UK exit would seriously weaken the EU and handicap its aspirations to become a more influential global player. At a time when the rise of non-western actors and illiberal regimes is affecting the global balance of power, with consequences also for regional disputes such as the Syria crisis, Turkey wants to see a more robust western alliance underpinned not only by NATO but also by a more effective EU.

Yet despite this initial observation, there may be a non-negligible silver lining to a possible Brexit from the Turkish viewpoint. If the UK were to leave, it would need to establish a new form of association that could possibly become a blueprint for Turkey's own relationship with the EU. Moreover this new model relationship would need to be different than the existing typology of EU partnerships.

It is often claimed that the UK would need to join the European Economic Area (EEA) in the case of a Brexit. But the

EEA represents a more extreme type of the policy dependency that would have led in the first place to the decision to leave the EU. EEA states are bound by the policy decisions of Brussels without having the ability to genuinely shape decisions. This type of almost total policy dependence, with its many implications for the nature of democracy at home, is unlikely to be acceptable to a large country like the UK.

At the other extreme of the partnership spectrum lies the “Strategic Partnership” model. This is the approach used for relationships with large and important countries like the US, Russia and China. But “Strategic Partners” do not aspire to any economic or political integration with the EU. As such the proposed structure of cooperation goes little beyond institutionalised dialogue, with mostly uncertain outcomes regarding any possible convergence of viewpoints or policies.

Even if it were to leave the EU, the UK would want to remain part of the Single Market but, as stated, without necessarily having to take on the commitments of EEA membership. Brussels and London would then need to create a new form of association that, on the one hand, would ensure with some exceptions the UK’s participation in the Single Market and on the other gives London some decision shaping ability in Brussels. There is no such model of association at present that arguably can be considered almost as a “virtual membership”. But that is exactly the structure that will need to be devised to retain a British anchor in Europe.

If London and Brussels can indeed devise such a new partnership model, this can very possibly be used also to anchor Turkey in the EU. It could be used to deflect existing scepticism on both sides. EU sceptics of Turkey’s membership would be led to understand that this formula pre-empts an eventual Turkish membership, while Turkish sceptics of the EU would be more content with a less accentuated form of the sharing of sovereignty that this new partnership would incorporate.

In many ways, therefore, the debate on the future of the UK’s relationship with the EU matters to Turkey. And even more so if in the wake of a possible Brexit, some creative thinking can lead to a new form of virtual membership.

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