

European views on the UK's renegotiation: Romania, Denmark, Belgium and Luxembourg

The success or failure of David Cameron's planned renegotiation of the UK's EU membership will depend to a large extent on how the other 27 EU member states respond to his proposals. But how do countries across the EU view the UK's renegotiation? Building on a [report](#) published in 2014 by the German Council on Foreign Relations, EUROPP is running a series of overviews of the renegotiation from each of the EU's member states. Compiled by the LSE's [Tim Oliver](#) and written by authors based at universities and research institutions, the overviews will set out what discussion – if any – there has been about the renegotiation and the wider views within each country on a potential Brexit. This post is the third in the series and gives views from Romania, Denmark, Belgium and Luxembourg.

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Romania: There is staunch opposition to restrictions on the free movement of people

Over the past year, political and public debates in Romania's mass-media on the UK's renegotiation demands have focused mostly on the potential impact on the fundamental liberties secured by the EU's treaties. Particular attention has been paid to the freedom of movement across the EU as a right which should not be overlooked or restricted in any way. This is regardless of the various reasons, with UK debates and fears about Romanian and Bulgarian workers moving to the UK in search of work being replaced over recent months by security concerns stemming from the Syrian refugee influx towards western and northern Europe.



Except for a few specific topics, the Romanian public and authorities oppose Westminster's declared intentions to renegotiate more opt-out clauses from EU treaties. The UK's renegotiation plans are viewed as another challenge to be overcome or dealt with by Romania, which, having joined the EU in 2007, is still working to secure the economic and political benefits of EU membership. Any attempts aimed at institutionalising national-driven, inward looking policies, regardless of their source or nature, are seen as a direct threat to the difficult progress Romania has made in connecting to the rest of the EU.

Similar opposition is shown to UK attempts to obtain further opt-outs from the economic and monetary dimensions of the Union, a position which stems from Romania's public support for the adoption of the euro (although Romania is still far from meeting the targets required for formal adoption of the single currency). The only reforms the UK has been pushing that Bucharest favours are an enhanced role for national parliaments and a more economically dynamic and outward looking EU. In relation to the latter, Romania advocates an economic rapprochement to countries in the Middle East and particularly with resource-rich Central Asia.

It should therefore come as no surprise that there is an explicit opposition to any future changes to in-work benefits for EU workers in the UK. The Romanian press has extensively quoted sources in the German press covering Chancellor Merkel's statements that a UK exit from the EU would be preferable to limitations of the right to free

movement across the Union. This opinion is one strongly shared by the Romanian authorities and has been made clear in various [statements](#) and [positions](#), though with nuances (for instance, while the support expressed for an unlimited freedom of movement was unequivocal, there was a focus on a responsible conduct in destination countries, in all forms – in the context of the controversies in the UK about potential abuse of social assistance systems by Romanians moving to Britain).

The UK's intention to limit the number of unqualified workers going to the UK in search of work is not favoured by the Romanian public and authorities, with [statements](#) to this effect being made both domestically and at EU level. Romania looks set to team up with Poland, Bulgaria and the Baltic states in opposing any UK push to restrict the right of free movement and more specifically, workers' rights across the EU.

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Denmark: The Danish government is a firm supporter of UK demands, albeit with some caveats

David Cameron's presentation of Britain's renegotiation demands at the European Council Meeting in late June 2015 coincided with a change of government in Denmark. This change of government has had significant implications for the Danish stance on the UK's renegotiation of its relationship with the EU. As a result of the Danish general elections on 18 June 2015, the centre-left Social Democrat/Social Liberal coalition government was replaced by a government consisting only of the right-wing Liberal Party. The outgoing Prime Minister, the Social Democrat Helle Thorning-Schmidt, represented Denmark at the European Council Meeting, but her ability to react to David Cameron's presentation of the British demands was affected by the incoming government's different line on British renegotiation.



The former government wanted to keep the UK in the EU, but stressed that Denmark should stay as close as possible to the EU core. It was also sceptical towards limiting welfare benefits for workers from other EU countries. The new government has no permanent majority across policy areas but is kept in power by the support of the Eurosceptic Danish People's Party, the Eurosceptic New Alliance and a much-reduced Conservative Party, which has become increasingly sceptical towards EU integration. The four parties had agreed on a common document prior to the 18 June elections which stressed the need to restrict the access of EU workers to social benefits in other EU countries and that they would, in general terms, support the UK renegotiation.

These elements found their way into the new Liberal government's policy programme issued at the end of June. The Danish Government aimed to ensure that "national welfare systems were not undermined by EU rules". The government would "work with like-minded countries in order to revise EU rules on welfare benefits for mobile workers as soon as possible". Last but not least, the [Danish government would](#) "support the British government's endeavours in order for the UK – one of Denmark's most crucial partners – to remain centrally placed in the EU."

The post-June Danish government is therefore to be counted as a firm supporter of the British demands for renegotiations. In the press release just before Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen's meeting in Downing Street on Monday 21 September, it was stressed that Denmark and the UK had many common interests in relation to free-trade, expansion of the internal market and a strengthening of member states' competitiveness. It [stated](#) that, "we want to work together with the UK on modernising EU-legislation on welfare benefits".

Although it has not been expressed directly, it is conceivable that [Denmark would be willing to support](#) the UK on elements such as its problems with the preamble, protection of rights for non-euro member states and a stronger role for national parliaments in some form or another. However, there are limits to this Danish support. Denmark [does not want treaty changes](#). The Danish government still stresses that it wants to stay as close as possible to the EU core.

A referendum will take place in December this year on whether Denmark should replace its exemption on justice and home affairs with an opt-in possibility to take part in legislation on Justice and Home Affairs – like the UK's present arrangement. Denmark – like the UK – does not take part in the EU's asylum policy and will not do so in the short term even if it is a yes in December.

The referendum is supported by the traditionally pro-EU parties in the Danish Parliament, including the Conservative Party. The present Danish government does not want a Danish in-out referendum à la the UK and there is no majority in the Danish parliament for such a referendum. However, the Danish People's Party does want a Danish referendum like the British one and holds up the British endeavours as an example to follow. The British renegotiation has clearly given impetus to Danish right-wing Euroscepticism.

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Belgium: The Belgian view is that European challenges can only be tackled through deepening European integration

Aside from crises such as that over Greece's place in the Eurozone or the ongoing refugee situation, European subjects do not attract much public attention in Belgium. It is therefore not surprising that the negotiations between the UK and the rest of the EU have not been particularly salient in media and public debates.



This is not helped by the secrecy surrounding British demands. What is known of the reforms demanded by the British government remain vague: no domination of the EU by the Eurozone, an opt-out from “ever closer union”, an increased role for national parliaments, less “red tape” for businesses, more free trade with the rest of the world, and changes to in-work benefits for EU migrants in the UK.

When Charles Michel, the Belgian Prime Minister, met David Cameron in June, he admitted that the latter had explained his position and strategy but did not want to unveil it fully. This is of course part of the negotiation game: to keep one's position secret while trying to detect the other's. This also explains the reluctance by the governments of many member states – with Belgium as no exception – to respond to questions about UK demands.

This being said, the UK position seems to have been welcomed, albeit with some scepticism, by the Belgian government. If the Belgian Prime Minister showed a clear willingness to listen to Cameron during his tour of European capitals, he nonetheless expressed important reservations concerning the renegotiation process. While he agreed that the EU should be reformed to become more competitive and efficient, to fight against social dumping and create growth and jobs, he insisted that these negotiations should not end up dismantling Europe.

The “red lines” for the Belgian government are therefore that the core European principles of free movement and non-discrimination should be untouched and that there should be no veto powers granted to national parliaments, since this would amount to institutional gridlock for the European Union. Charles Michel also warned that the British could not seek a deal where the UK has only the advantages of belonging to the EU while leaving the inconvenient aspects for others.

It should be noted here that during the European Council on 25-26 June, the Belgian Prime Minister was the only one to respond to David Cameron's comment on his referendum project. He highlighted the importance of involving all member states and the European commission in this project, in order to avoid Britain trying to present a “fait accompli” at the December European summit based on limited discussions with only a few member states.

All these statements are consistent with a widespread view in Belgium, particularly within the Liberal party led

government, that numerous current challenges for Europeans can be tackled only if one deepens European integration. From that perspective, the Belgian foreign affairs Minister Didier Reynders even defends the necessity to push for European federalism, particularly within the Eurozone. This does not necessarily present an obstacle to Britain's desire to distance itself from some of the EU's policies and institutions. Other member states such as Germany or France have also indicated they may be willing to accommodate some of Britain's demands while at the same time strengthening the governance of the Eurozone.

One of the reasons why the federalist approach, still very much present in Belgian politics, is not at odds with all of Britain's desired reforms is that some of them are ideologically attuned to the liberal-conservative agenda of the current Belgian government. More specifically, the willingness to cut "red tape", strengthen the single market or increase trade agreements with the rest of the world is not only very compatible with some current EU policies (the agenda for "better regulation" for instance or the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations). It is also very much supported by most right wing political groups.

Yet, the Belgian government is a coalition of liberals, social Christians and Flemish nationalists, whose political agreement involves similar objectives. It might be useful to note here that these demands are the ones that trigger the most support elsewhere in the EU. Nevertheless, there are internal divisions within the Belgian government on the issue of migration and non-discrimination. Indeed, Bart de Wever, the leader of the Flemish nationalist Party NVA (belonging to the same "European Conservatives and Reformists" group as the Conservative Party inside the European Parliament) has supported the British demand for tough national limitations on migrations within the EU.

Some of these divisions might indicate that the issue of "Brexit" is not only one that can be understood along national lines, but is an issue that also requires an analysis of ideological convergences and divergences both within and across member states. This is all the more important since the supranational institutions which could be involved in designing the reforms wanted by Britain's Conservatives are characterised by ideological as much as national opposition.

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Luxembourg: There is no enthusiasm in Luxembourg for treaty change

Luxembourg, which holds the EU Council Presidency until the end of 2015, has proclaimed that it will count its 12th EU Presidency a success if it manages to steer the UK towards staying a member of the EU. The UK demands for a renegotiation represent, along with the Greek and refugee crises, an additional burden to the [successful management of this Presidency](#) for such a small country. However, it also places Luxembourg at the frontline of the negotiations, giving it the opportunity to show that its famous negotiation skills were not just due to former Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, but are a systemic feature of the Luxembourg governmental culture.



For the Luxembourg government, it is clear that the [UK should stay in the EU](#). The Luxembourg government has stated that, "[Keeping the UK in the EU is of strategic importance.](#)" With the UK a big contributor to the EU budget, a Brexit would mean an increase in Luxembourg's contributions. Furthermore, the EU would lose some of its clout in international affairs, which Luxembourg regards as highly detrimental.

The public discussions over a Brexit naturally focus on the impact on the Luxembourg banking industry, as the ties between the two countries are especially close in this domain. The President of the Luxembourg Banker's Association has stated that Luxembourg would lose [a close ally in EU](#) negotiations concerning financial markets and taxation.

On the other hand, a study by the Bertelsmann Foundation found that Luxembourg might actually benefit from a Brexit, as some hedge funds might relocate from the UK to Luxembourg in order to stay in the European market

(although these speculations may have been overstated). Luxembourg has no Eurosceptic parties to speak of; therefore the debate is framed mostly in terms of a cost-benefit analysis. Britain's demands for reform have not triggered any kind of debate in Luxembourg on reform of the EU. Instead, the British are seen as eccentrics who constantly want to change the rules of the game.

Luxembourg's Foreign Minister, Jean Asselborn, has acknowledged that some reforms to improve the functioning of the EU could be possible, but without giving any details. Luxembourg is usually open to free trade, so it is in favour of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and other trade deals. The Luxembourg government has openly rejected any treaty change, saying it would open a Pandora's box. If treaty changes were on the table, other countries would raise their particular demands and, [according](#) to Asselborn, "the EU would die".

This means the founding principles of the EU, such as free movement of people, should not be touched. Luxembourg counts on Germany and France to stay united on the point of treaty change, these countries being its natural and [strongest allies](#). The Luxembourg government has supported an enhanced role for national parliaments in EU decision making. However, it has not made any official comments on the UK's demand for an opt-out from 'ever closer union' or to changes to in-work benefits for EU migrants in the UK. It may be possible that these demands would not pose the greatest problems, but the devil is in the details. Any proposal that implies a treaty change is unlikely to be met with enthusiasm.

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