

European views on the UK's renegotiation: France, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Latvia

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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 second in the series and gives views from France, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Latvia.

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France: The French are looking for a fair deal for France and the EU, not just for Britain

France has been ambivalent on the British renegotiation campaign. The general mood is to keep the UK in, but messages are going in different directions. Some are shrugging off the UK's calls for reform and are not trying very hard to accommodate Westminster. Others seem keener to find an acceptable deal for Britain.



George Osborne's visit to Paris in late July illustrates this situation. He got a cold shoulder from Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, not much more from Finance Minister Michel Sapin, and a warmer welcome from Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron. Meanwhile, François Hollande's meeting with David Cameron a few days ago could be summed up as: "we are ready to discuss, but give us a list of reforms we can actually talk about".

Yet, it seems that Emmanuel Macron has swayed the debate on the UK renegotiation so that it should be incorporated in the broader discussions on the EMU reforms. France has indeed started to work on proposals to reform the Eurozone and an institutional debate is likely to start after the French presidential and German general elections in 2017. The feasibility of this balance between the French plans for the EMU – still inchoate – and the UK plans – still fuzzy – remains evidently unclear though.

France is generally perceived as one of the potential hardliners in the renegotiations. But French diplomacy is attempting to quell this view. To some extent, it is indeed exaggerated, but France has some clear red lines. The two countries could find common ground on the need to recalibrate EU regulation and promote competitiveness. The French support the European Commission's Regulatory Fitness and Performance programme (REFIT) and have tried to upload the "choc de simplification" at the EU level, in particular to ease up the regulatory burden over SMEs. They, however, oppose any attempt to water down legislation on social and consumers' rights.

France would be amenable to finding a deal to 'protect the integrity of the single market' as long as it is not legally binding and would not impede on the developments of the Eurozone. That, however, clearly falls below the UK's expectations. Changing in-work benefits for EU migrants is also a touchy issue. If ECJ rulings can alter the

jurisdiction, France will welcome this development, because any adjustment to the primary or secondary law on this point will likely be quashed. In a way, France is telling Britain to change its system, not the EU's.

The role of national parliaments and granting an opt-out of the 'ever closer union' do not trigger vivid debates. The whole British debate on 'ever closer union' is mind-numbing for the French. That being said, some realise an opt-out could cause legal problems. This reference has repeatedly been used by the ECJ in its rulings and the implications of a British opt-out could be greater than imagined on the surface of the debate.

Lastly, the role of national parliaments leaves the French quite indifferent. Two reasons justify this position. First, the French Parliament (the *Assemblée Nationale* and the *Sénat*) are secondary actors in French EU politics compared to the government and the President. Second, the priority is to streamline the scrutiny process more than to explore legal ways to implement a green or red card system. The French Senate has supported the non-legally-binding first 'green card' launched by the House of Lords on food waste, but the French government is unlikely to echo a call for additional parliamentary powers.

France wants the UK to remain within the EU and to quote Jean-Claude Juncker will strive to find a 'fair deal'. However that deal will have to be fair for Britain but most importantly for France, and more broadly the EU.

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The Netherlands: There is support for the UK's renegotiation, but only up to a point

The Hague has a strong economic and political interest to keep the UK in the EU. The Dutch government also shares several of Downing Street's concerns about the functioning of the EU. It will therefore work with London in the renegotiation, but only up to a point.



While serving as minister of foreign affairs, Frans Timmermans outlined a number of EU reform ideas that have since become part of the Juncker Commission's agenda and David Cameron's renegotiation wish-list. These include a stronger role for national parliaments in EU decision-making (e.g. yellow and red cards), better regulation, and a deeper single market with less red tape for businesses. Despite Timmermans' move to the Commission in late 2014, the Dutch position has remained the same, and David Cameron will continue to find The Hague by his side on these issues.

Even in the controversial area of reducing the access to benefits of EU migrants, Cameron may find some support from the Dutch. The Dutch government is concerned about 'benefit tourism' and EU migrants undercutting local wages. But the issue is less politically sensitive than in the UK, and The Hague will not support any steps that are discriminatory or that undermine the single market. A case in point is that, so far, in the context of the refugee crisis, the Netherlands has not called for a revision of Schengen or suggested reforms that would impact the freedom of movement.

There are more red lines, however. The Netherlands may go some way toward easing British concerns about the position of non-Eurozone countries, but it will stop short of agreeing to changes that could make Eurozone decision-making more complicated or less efficient.

A compromise on the notion of "ever closer union" is possible, but treaty change in general is out of the question. This would likely trigger a politically-sensitive EU referendum in the Netherlands. Even the promise of future treaty change could be problematic. In early 2016, the Netherlands will hold a non-binding referendum on the EU's association agreement with Ukraine, which could further fuel Dutch Eurosceptic sentiment.

So far, in the public domain, there has been little discussion about the renegotiation, and only some discussion

about the impact of 'Brexit'. Overall, a sense of complacency pervades; that, in the end, the British public will vote rationally and vote to stay in. At the level of European diplomacy, however, the Netherlands may feel it has a special role to play during the renegotiation. Not only because of key positions held by Dutchmen in Brussels, such as Commissioner Timmermans, Secretary-General of the Council Alexander Italianer, or Jeroen Dijsselbloem, President of the Eurogroup.

Personally, Cameron and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte get along well, and come from similar political backgrounds. And importantly, there is a belief in Dutch diplomatic circles that the Netherlands can build bridges (and reach compromises) between its two important neighbours, the UK and Germany. The renegotiation would surely be a moment to prove this.

Finally, the Netherlands will hold the Council presidency in early 2016. Although this means that it will have to play a more neutral role from 1 January 2016 onwards, the presidency could overlap with the UK's referendum vote and a potentially controversial post-referendum aftermath. Taken together, this means that for Cameron the Dutch will never be far away.

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Slovenia: The government believes the EU's four freedoms should remain the basis for any change

There have been a number of meetings between the UK and Slovene governments during which the UK's concern and renegotiation have been raised. In spring 2014, Slovenian Prime Minister Alenka Bratušek (of the centre-left "Positive Slovenia" party) visited London to host an investors' conference and meet with British Prime Minister David Cameron.



Bratušek's government, facing public finance pressures in the context of the Eurozone crisis, was pursuing pragmatic economic and European policies which had brought it closer to the UK's views. During a short meeting Bratušek and Cameron discussed a range of issues including the forthcoming European Parliament elections and the future of the EU, but no details of their discussions were revealed.

In February 2015, British Foreign Minister Philip Hammond paid a visit to Slovenia to present the UK's position on EU reform. Focusing on economic aspects such as employment and growth, Hammond, in his own words, found there was lots of agreement on these issues between the two countries. However, a key issue for the UK about limitations of social rights for other EU member state citizens in the UK was the one picked up on by the Slovene media. The media reported that Germany in principle sympathised with some elements of the UK's proposal, but that Poland was insisting that Cameron would not get far on the issue.

Other issues pushed by the UK, such as competitiveness of the internal market, the powers Brussels has over national parliaments and the unequal position of non-euro members were reported to be less problematic or less defined. The new Slovene government coalition, which took power in September 2014 under the leadership of Miro Cerar (of the centre-left "Modern Centre Party"), has not yet made clear any positions on the UK's proposals. According to the Slovene daily *Delo*, government representatives, however, have said that a "strong EU is needed which needs a strong UK". This echoed the words Angela Merkel used one year before during her visit to London.

Following Cameron's victory at the UK elections, the Slovene media focused on his promise to hold a referendum. The possible secession of Scotland was discussed in case voters in the rest of the UK voted to leave. The media argued that a Brexit could harm Slovene firms working for major EU car manufacturers, for which the UK is an important market. However, Brexit is still considered to be a more costly development for the UK. Slovene media have quoted a study by the Bertelsmann institute according to which the costs of a Brexit for the UK were estimated

at €300 billion.

Cameron's June 2015 EU tour included a stop in Slovenia. This was the first visit of any UK Prime Minister to Slovenia since its independence in 1991. Prime Minister Cerar said he appreciated Cameron's decision to visit smaller EU members. This contrasted with the ignorance shown toward smaller members during negotiations on the Greek bailout that took place on the margins of the EU Summit in Riga one month before.

In Cerar's view, it was Cameron's party that was pressuring him to hold a referendum and to impose tougher rules on EU migrants to the UK. He said Slovenia was ready to listen to Britain's ideas and consider them thoroughly in the coming months. Cerar, however, also said Slovenia "wants a successful EU that is connected in vital areas". In his view the EU's four freedoms should remain the basis for any change.

The Slovene media have reported that in other EU capitals there is a growing sentiment against the type of changes to the Lisbon Treaty that would be required to satisfy the UK's demands. On the centre-right, Cameron's visit did lead to arguments that if as much attention was paid to the UK's views as to keeping Greece in the Eurozone, then the EU's competitiveness problems would be long gone. However, Slovenia lacks a modern Eurosceptic party that questions Slovene EU membership.

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Latvia: National security, not EU reform, is the priority

Russia's aggression in Ukraine, which started in February 2014, has changed the geopolitical perspective for Latvia. It has become far more difficult in Latvia to criticise the European Union and NATO membership with a resurgent Russia flexing its military muscle in the country's neighbourhood. The idea of leaving the EU or the necessity of fundamentally reorganising the Union is not on the agenda for the political elite of Latvia.



The securitisation of EU membership has led to the further marginalisation of Eurosceptic organisations in Latvia. According to a 2014 Eurobarometer poll, [57 per cent disagree](#) that Latvia could better face the future outside of the EU. Compared to other countries, Latvia is in the middle of EU opinion, while the United Kingdom, with only 36 per cent disagreeing, is last among EU member states. In Latvia, the EU is perceived as one of the pillars for national security. The UK's attempts at a renegotiation and the forthcoming referendum therefore do not resonate with policy makers or the majority of Latvian society.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the issues on Prime Minister David Cameron's agenda are not on the agenda of politicians in Latvia. In May 2015 Cameron visited Riga for the Eastern Partnership summit. This was his first face-to-face meeting with the EU's leaders after his victory in the May 2015 UK elections. The focus of the summit was on the EU's relations with Eastern Partnership countries, however Cameron's goal for the meeting was to press his case for EU reform and renegotiation. During the conference, and in the Prime Minister's press conference following the summit, Cameron [spoke about](#) Britain's unhappiness with the status quo, of "burdensome EU rules," the problems of immigration, and the necessity for EU reform. His agenda was not welcomed.

In a bilateral meeting with Cameron, the Prime Minister of Latvia Laimdota Straujuma [suggested](#) that these topics were not welcome ones for discussion in Riga. Afterwards, Cameron himself reflected that he was "[not met by a wall of love](#)" at the summit. During and after the summit, his statements left no visible impact in the domestic political debates in Latvia. The securitisation of EU membership has led to a lack of meaningful debate in Latvia about the necessity of reforming the Union. It is hard to criticise something your national security depends on and this was reflected by the lack of support given to the issues raised by David Cameron.

Little has changed since the meeting in May. Most of the aforementioned issues pursued by the UK are still not on Latvia's political agenda. Immigration is on the agenda, but this has nothing to do with the UK. The necessity for EU member states to accept their share of asylum seekers has pushed the issue of immigration onto the political elite and society of Latvia.

The government of Latvia follows the developments of the possible UK exit and renegotiation, hoping the UK and EU will come to an understanding. Changes in the core values of the EU, such as limitations on the free movement of persons, goods and services, would not be welcome in Latvia. However, there are no serious debates on the need for reform of the EU, the necessity to simplify EU regulations or other similar issues. These are not priorities for Latvia; national security is.

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