Chapter 4
Perspectives on the United Kingdom’s Withdrawal from the European Union

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ABSTRACT

The European Community/Union has always been a controversial issue in the UK. At present, the probability of an in-or-out referendum makes it all the more divisive. Eurosceptics see a brighter future for their country outside the union both in political and economic terms. Pro-Europeans, on the other hand, maintain that British membership brings up benefits that outweigh the costs. Both sides have their arguments. The former seek success through social mobilizations and debates. The latter believe that the anti-EU stance may be costly in economic and political terms. Hence, the public must be convinced before the referendum – if it ever takes place.

INTRODUCTION

Since Britain joined the then European Community in 1973, policy-makers of both wings of the political spectrum had to face the question of their country’s place in Europe. At present, the question is all the more significant in the Union of 28 members that moved forward in economic and political integration. In this context, Britain’s exit from the European Union (EU), known as Brexit or Brixit, seems to be a probability considerable enough to spark serious discussions.

A member state leaving the EU has never been witnessed before, but it is legally possible since the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force in 2009. Bold as it may seem, the decision can be taken if there is enough public support for it. Consequently, it seems pertinent to advocate the consideration of pro and con arguments while reflecting on the possibility of Brexit – Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union. Thus, the first part of the study will be allotted to the factors that make Brexit possible while the second will focus on those that make it seem unlikely.
THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN FAVOR OF BRITISH WITHDRAWAL

There are basically three pillars that fuel the Eurosceptic stance in Britain. First, the public opinion is divided over but increasingly supportive of the idea of quitting the European Union. Second, and in close connection with the previous point, social mobilizations have gained momentum especially in the last few years. Third, the debates on Brexit are held around the fears of people.

British Public Opinion on Parting Ways with the EU

Historical experience and national interest, combined, provide for varying degree of sympathy to regional integration schemes. In Britain’s case, the perception of the EC/EU integration has not been very positive due to the peculiarities that have been forged in time (Aspinwall, 2000; Wallace, 1991). Parliamentary divisions on the accession to the common market in 1970s, along with the low rate of support measured by opinion polls, reflect the difficulty posed by the European question for British policymakers (Gifford, 2014; Lazer, 1976). The mobilization against the Treaty of Maastricht characterized by alliances involving intra and extra-parliamentary groupings also proved the extent of Euroscepticism in the country (Gifford, 2006).

Hence, one can legitimately argue that the discussions on Brexit (or Brixit) have a historical background. In 2013, they took another dimension when the PM promised to let the British people decide on whether or not to stay in the EU. The referendum is thus expected to take place in 2017 if, indeed, the Conservative Party wins the legislative elections of 2015. The referendum project is bolstered by the UK Independence Party, British National Party, the Green Party of England and Wales as well. Nevertheless, the majority of the Labour Party members oppose the idea of a referendum unless the UK is forced to give up on more of its sovereignty in favor of the European Union (“EU referendum”, 2014). The number of Labour MPs taking part in the movement calling on party leadership to back the EU referendum is less than 20 (http://labourforareferendum.com). Liberal Democrats form another group which will seek referendum only if questions of sovereignty transfer arise (Watt, 2014).

Obviously, Cameron wants to negotiate for an enhanced British position within the EU before holding the in-or-out referendum (Bentley & Glaze, 2012). After a “real change in terms of Europe”, British people will have the opportunity to make the “real choice” (Wintour, 2012). This attitude reflects in fact the PM’s anti-Brexit stance, perhaps difficult to perceive after his parting ways with the center-right European People’s Party. If Tories have joined the ranks of Eurosceptic and anti-federalist European Conservatives and Reformists, the majority of party members do not wish to see their country leaving the EU. Hence, Cameron has consented to the in-or-out referendum because he aimed to appease the non-negligible anti-EU voices in Britain. In his opinion, “British national interest is to reform the EU, to organize a referendum over this reform and to recommend that [Britain] remains [in the EU]” (Albert, 2014).

The British PM’s move seems to serve at least three purposes simultaneously. The first (and most obvious) one is related to the maximization of national interests: Cameron wanted to seize the opportunity to meet the widely-shared British demand to negotiate with Brussels for better terms of membership. The second one concerns the political gain he can reap for conservatives: The referendum will take place only if his party can renew its term in 2015. He therefore uses a strong public demand as an opportunity to increase his chances for re-election. The fact that Labour will not seek referendum makes the bid all the more meaningful. The third benefit he can expect is