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Perspectives of the British Membership in the European Union 2014

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1. Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) has been a full member of the European Community (EC), later European Union (EU), since 1973. However, the British membership has been questioned many times since back then. The first referendum on the membership took place already two years after the accession, in 1975, and had been connected to preceding renegotiation of the membership terms, concerning for instance common agriculture policy or relations with the Commonwealth. According to the results of the referendum, the UK stayed in the community under slightly renegotiated conditions. Nowadays, after many years of more or less successful cooperation with the continental Europe, the British EU membership is being seriously questioned again. According to Prime Minister's European policy, characterized as "reform, renegotiation, referendum", British government is already preparing reports for discussions about European competences in their country and talks about the "review of the balance competences" are taken.

As indicated above, the phenomenon of questioning British membership in the European integration is definitely not a new one. Why are the British still not sure about their EU membership? Do they really desire the "Brexit", or is their aim just to renegotiate the membership terms? Is it more a consequence of short-term trends, or has it rather deeper roots in the previous decades?

Concerning the "deeper roots" of the complicated British-European relationship, further analysis overreaching extent of this paper would be needed. As an example can be just the fact that the UK differs from the continental Europe in many ways. It is an island(s) with long history of democratic institutions that had ruled over the greatest colonial empire ever. Moreover, since 1066, inhabitants of the islands have had no experience with war directly in their land. On the other hand, such an experience boosted European cooperation after the World War II and the UK had at its beginning no more important reason to join European Coal and Steel Community, European Atomic Energy Community or succeeding European Economic Community (EEC).

Also from philosophical point of view the British are different. Where they are used to solve problems immediately through discussions, the “continental” Europeans are creating committees or even much more complicated structures to deal with their issues. This dichotomy evolves mainly from differences between preferred philosophical discourses – British empiricism and European rationalism – and cause serious misunderstandings during European negotiations and in the various institutions of the EU.

Nevertheless, this paper aims mainly at the period of the British membership in the European integration. It is now more than a half of century after famous Dean Acheson’s speech about Britain that had recently “lost an Empire, but not yet found a role” (Whiteman 2014). Since that time, many consequences have changed. However, Britain’s relationship with Europe is still complicated. Moreover, the process of devolution is strengthening, a possibility of Scottish independence is still opened. The UK is nowadays definitely at a point of some historical change.

The aim of this paper is to define possible future scenarios of the Britain’s relationship with the European integration under the most actual conditions, as well as according to long-term trends prevailing during the observed relationship, and to contribute to current debates about future of Great Britain and eventually the EU and its role in the world politics and economy. Regarding the long-term trends, the author analyses main aspects of the relationship, as often inappropriately interpreted British euroscepticism or selective access of British representatives to some of the European policies. The phenomenon of so-called “awkward partner” is also taken into account. The above described trends will be confronted with the most actual events to analyse a consistence of British approach to the EU.

The paper is divided into three chapters. The first will deal with the above-mentioned specific long-term trends of the British EU membership, concretely the phenomenon of continuity in British European policies, as well as British public opinion on Europe and also exceptions to the European treaties, negotiated by Britain. The second chapter deals with the development of the observed relationship and confronts the last events with the long-term trends defined in the chapter one. The third chapter than defines the possible future scenarios of the British EU membership.

Concerning the resources, primary sources such as government documents or data from British institutions' official websites and studies from renowned research centres have been mainly used. To analyse the latest developments author studied primarily press reports of British and European media. Long-term specifics of the Euro-British relationship have been analysed on the basis of Czech, British and other authors' workings.

2. Specific characteristics of the British membership in the EU

The UK as an EU member state differs in many areas from the other member states. What are the characteristics that determine this dissimilarity? Apart from the negotiated exceptions to some of the European treaties, the UK can be also characterized by relatively continuous European policy, independent on a political party in power, and also by traditionally "eurosceptic" population.

British European policy continuity

In the long term, the British approach to the European politics is relatively stable. The three main long-term characteristics are as following: first, a preference of the intergovernmental model of the European cooperation, second, a long-standing promotion of economic and trade liberalization not only within Europe and third, an emphasis on a special relationship with the USA and thus different view on Europe "from outside". While focusing on the transatlantic relationship had been predominantly manifested in the early days of the British EC membership, the preference of the intergovernmental model and support of economic liberalization remain current (Kasáková; Váška 2007, 169-170).

According to Bertogliatti (2013, 12-22), the continuity of British European policy is based on three main characteristics of the British political environment. First, the so-called insular mentality that makes the British feel to be different from the rest of the Europe. This feeling is based on more than thousand-year long history of the country. Related to this could be an emphasis on freedom of promoting their own interests in the world, and thus in the EU. The third is a great importance of strong personalities at the British political scene that have had a great influence on shaping the relationship of the country with the EU.

The current system of development and coordination of the British European policy differs, according to Kasáková and Váška (2007, 169-170), very little from the original mechanism that has been set in the early 1970's. Since then, the British European policy has been relatively well coordinated. However, in terms of the Brussels "culture of compromise" the position of the UK sometimes appears to be insufficiently flexible. Overall, the adaptation of the British political and administrative system to the EU membership is considered successful, even when the UK has to deal with problems resulting from the effect of the late accession and from different attitudes to some common European policies.

One of the most recent available government documents relating to the European policy is written largely in line with the above described trends. The importance of state sovereignty and the need for reform of decision-making in the European institutions towards intergovernmental principles are well-emphasised (The Stationery Office Limited, 2013).

British public opinion and European integration

British history compared to the European has not gone through many significant reversals. For instance, there was no revolution on the islands since the 17th century. According to Paterson (2003, 32-33), this phenomenon occurs due to the absence of a codified constitution and reformed institutions. Thanks to this, the British prefer to solve their problems when they occur, which is highly inconsistent with functioning of the European bureaucracy. From these differences emerges a low rate of British public identification with the EU. Simply, there are more doubts about benefits of the membership among the British than among the other Europeans. Even when British public and politicians express support for the EU, it is often rather a pragmatic approach based on calculation of material and political costs and benefits, than an expression of identification with the "abstract ideal of European unification" (Kasáková; Váška 2007, 171-172).

According to many opinion polls, British public opinion on the EU is continuously worsening since the 1990's (Booker; North, 2006: 435-465), (Barclay, Miller 2012, 1). However, this trend has been disproved by the 2004 survey, which showed that half of all the British were in principle for membership. It should be noted that the survey was issued together with eurooptimistic paper (Rannoch; Pollard 2005), which had been defending the adoption of the

European Constitution. Barclay and Miller (2012: 3) describe the long-term survey from the years 2004–2009 in which people from Britain and other EU countries answered the question whether they trust into EU. However, fluctuations of the British opinions quite faithfully followed changes in other member states. Nevertheless, British confidence has always been at a significantly lower level than the rest of the EU average.

These trends continue into the present. According to a survey conducted by a company YouGov in 2012, 49 % of the British were in favour of cancelling the EU membership and only 28 % were in favour of staying in the EU (Reuters 2012). In November 2012 were for the membership even 56 % of Britons (Boffey, Helm 2012). In the mid-2013, a survey from The Bruges Group stated that even 71% of Britons would prefer a withdrawal from the EU and re-entry into the European Free Trade Area (Survation 2013) Nevertheless, it should be noted that The Bruges Group is a think tank that is “against British involvement in a single European state” (brugesgroup.com). However, Brown (2012, 4-5) states that in the UK during polls on the EU it is very important in which manner are the questions asked. If the questions include more conditions, the most popular answer is not a termination of the EU membership, but a following membership in a less integrated Europe.

According to the latest surveys from YouGov, at the end of March 2014 would 42 % of the British vote for staying in the EU and 36 % would leave EU. The trend is in favour with those, who would stay in the European integration (YouGov.com 2014).

British exceptions in the European treaties and agreements

Another feature of the British European policy is an absence of some aspects of the European integration process, or special arrangements negotiated in some areas of common European policies. According to Svoboda (2012), The UK is an EU member state with the largest number of these exceptions. We would like to mention the most important of them.

First, it had been an exception to the common EU social policy, negotiated by the Conservative government of John Major in 1991. However, the Labour government of Tony Blair abolished this exception shortly after taking power in 1997 (Svoboda 2012).

A second difference is the British rebate or discount on the EU budget, which was negotiated thanks to efforts of Margaret Thatcher in 1984. Before the rebate came into practice, the British economy had to contribute to the EU budget a disproportionately large part (Marini 2005). A crucial turn came in 2005 at a summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, where the then Prime Minister Tony Blair said that the "British rebate is an anomaly that has to go" (BBC 2005). Subsequently, the rebate for the multiannual financial framework for the years 2007-2013 has been reduced. Nevertheless, in connection with problems that occurred after the British veto on the European Fiscal Compact¹ in December 2011, discussion on the British rebate future were led (Watt 2012). However, during negotiations on the EU multiannual financial framework for the years 2014-2020, the agreement about conservation of the rebate has been reached (europa.eu).

During negotiations about the Maastricht Treaty, the British representation which had been led by conservative Prime Minister John Major, has negotiated an exception for the third stage of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Under the New Labour's Tony Blair's government there was an attempt to adopt the Euro in the future through definition of the so-called Brown's five economic tests. The possible British membership in the third stage of EMU remained opened until December 2011, when David Cameron at the Brussels summit vetoed the Fiscal Compact and said at the same time that Britain does not intend to adopt the Euro in the future (The Economist 2011). Nevertheless, it could not be expected that this statement will be true forever.

Another exception concerns the Schengen Agreement. Britain with Ireland refused to participate in certain aspects of the contract and negotiated a derogation, thanks to which they can continue to carry out inspections at the border, whose abolition would be deprived of the ability to control immigration. Yet Britain participates since 2000 in the Schengen Information System and in the police and judicial cooperation. It has a right at any time to request the Council of the EU a full membership (Subiková 2008, 11-13, 49). The most recent exceptions

¹ The Fiscal Compact is an intergovernmental treaty introduced as a new stricter version of the previous Stability and Growth Pact, signed on 2 March 2012 by all member states of the EU at the time, except the Czech Republic and the UK. The formal name of the treaty is Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union. The treaty entered into force on 1 January 2013 (Council of the EU 2013).

are points negotiated in the Lisbon Treaty concerning the area of freedom, security and justice (Brown 2012, 29-30). These were negotiated by the leaders of the UK on the basis of efforts of the British Parliament that had set the so-called "red lines", the conditions that had to be met before ratification of the treaty (Syllová, Kuta 2008).

3. Development of the British-European relationship

The UK joined the European Community, the predecessor of the European Union, during the first-ever expansion together with Ireland and Denmark. Already in the first years of the membership, the British government sought to strengthen the intergovernmental wing of the EC and has continued to do so to the present. These years, however, were not without problems both for the UK and the EC. In 1975, just two years after the accession, the Labour government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson² announced a referendum on staying in the EC. Under the referendum, the terms of accession had been renegotiated, and the country had confirmed its membership (Booker, North 2006, 198-210).

Upcoming years were marked by struggles to reduce Britain's contributions to the EC budget. They were finally finished in the 1980's by the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who contributed significantly to negotiations about the so-called British rebate. It has been finally put into practice as a part of the European budget corrective mechanism³ (Bič 2011, 103-104).

² Harold Wilson served as Prime Minister between 1964 to 1970 and 1974 to 1976. Concerning his foreign policy, he wanted to maintain Britain's world role by keeping the Commonwealth united and nurturing the Anglo-American alliance. After sterling crisis in 1967, he applied unsuccessfully for British EC membership. However, Britain accessed the EC in 1973, during Conservative government of Edward Heath. In Wilson's second term as a Prime Minister, he initiated renegotiation of the membership (Clement 2014).

³ There were three corrective mechanisms adopted between the years 1975–1984. The first one was valid in the years 1976–1980 and had generally applied to any member country. Due to its strict conditions, however, it had been never taken into practice. Therefore, at the end of 1979 had been adopted the second mechanism, which ensured the reduction of the UK contribution to the Community budget. This mechanism had been linked with planned reform of the Common Agricultural Policy that unfortunately was not introduced not even in the early 80's. In that time, new problems with the community budget revenues emerged and British government was refusing to increase its contributions, because the requirement to reform the agricultural policy was still not fulfilled. Therefore at a summit in Fontainebleau in 1984 the member countries agreed on a new, the third, correction mechanism that would enable Great Britain to reduce its contribution to the budget, and the so-called British rebate arised (Bič 2011, s. 103–104).

Due to British dismissive attitudes to some European policies have begun during the discussions about the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990's processes today described as principles of the multi-speed Europe (Dostál 2010, 23-60). Moreover, the multi-speed Europe is also boosted by enlarging the EU that has been always supported by British leaders for a variety of reasons. For instance, the eastern enlargement in 2004 had been strongly supported by the New Labour government led by Tony Blair (Gonč 2006, pp. 137-138).

The current David Cameron's coalition government has been in power since 2010. The Prime Minister has decided to solve the delicate European issue that has helped to ruin a number of conservative governments before, by a program called "reform, renegotiation, referendum" (Helm 2013).

European policy of the Conservative party

Even before David Cameron became Prime Minister in 2010, he was known for his eurosceptic opinions. Like many conservative leaders before him he found creating European policy very difficult mainly due to an existence of a radical eurosceptic wing in his party. The Conservatives have published their official views on the EU in November 2009, i.e. before the general election of 2010. Their main goal was to adjust the Treaty of Accession of the UK to the EC from 1972 so that any future European treaty that would strive to move any powers from Britain to the EU will have to become a subject of referendum. The program has been received very positively by British public (Fitzgerald 2009, 3-11).

The Conservative Party won the general election in 2010. However, a new government had to be created on the basis of a coalition agreement with mostly pro-European Liberal Democrats. Therefore the governmental European policy has been strongly influenced by the agreement. There was a commitment in the coalition agreement, that in the future there will be no transfer of national sovereignty without parliament vote. This commitment includes also a possibility of reassessment of existing EU competences in the UK that currently takes place (Brown 2012: 3-4).

David Cameron's veto against the Fiscal Compact

The Fiscal Compact has been negotiated in January 2012 and signed in March 2012. The UK refused to participate in the agreement already in December 2011 at the EU summit in Brussels (Mortensen 2013). David Cameron, in accordance with his European policy, demanded that any transfer of power from a national regulator to an EU regulator on financial services would be subject to a veto, that Eurozone banks should face a higher capital requirement, that the European Banking Authority should remain in London⁴ and the European Central Bank should be rebuffed in its attempts to rule that euro-denominated transactions take place within the Eurozone. His key argument against the Fiscal Compact was that the Eurozone countries could use the European institutions to weaken British interests in the single market. At the same time he admitted that there are risks of isolation of his country in the process. He also stressed, however, that the UK will protect its position and will insist that the EU institutions could not be used to enforce fiscal rules (Watt 2011).

From a view of further development of the European integration, the UK has gained nothing essential by the veto against the Fiscal Compact. Other member countries follow with ongoing reform program and moreover, British representatives received no assurance that their country will escape the financial regulation from the EU in the future. In this area, in December 2013 the EU reached even closer agreement without the participation of the UK. At the summit in Brussels, that took place between 19 and 20 December 2013, the principles of banking union have been approved. It is a relatively large change in the functioning of the EU, but the UK will have no possibility to influence it (Hudema 2013).

Governmental European policy after David Cameron's speech in January 2013

According to Oliver (2013), the above described escalation of the British European policy could lead to a greater stability of Britain's relationship with the EU. The intensification of the problem would result in more comprehensive solution in the future. The current government relies not only on the planned referendum on staying in the EU, but mainly on the related

⁴ There were suggestions that it might be consolidated in the European Security and Markets Authority in Paris and The European Central Bank be rebuffed in its attempts to rule that euro-denominated transactions take place within the Eurozone (Watt 2011).

“review of competences” - redefining the British relationship with the European integration. The plan has been made public by David Cameron on 23 January 2013, when his European policy has been summed up in the slogan "reform, renegotiation, referendum". Nevertheless, while it is still not entirely clear how the current government wants to influence the reform of the EU, the redefinition of Britain's relationship with the EU is currently in process (Parliament.uk 2014).

Already in July 2012, the government announced that by 2014 an extensive survey aimed to define the European competences in the UK will be issued. As a reason for this decision, the government announced that the Eurozone crisis is fundamentally changing the cooperation in the EU that further leads to differentiated integration, i.e. the principles of already mentioned multi-speed Europe. Therefore, the government declared that it wants to actively participate in the future European integration trends (Brown 2012: 3-4). Until now, the government holds the original plan and according to the schedule set in 2012 gradually publishes studies focusing on various areas of EU competences in the UK (gov.uk).

Concerning the third point of Cameron's European policy, a “referendum”, the EU Referendum Bill has not passed the House of Lords in January 2014, however, the Prime Minister said that he will ensure that the referendum will still take place in 2017. The EU Referendum Bill was not a governmental bill, but rather an initiative of the Conservative Party backbenchers. Moreover, the chairman of the Liberal Democrats Nick Clegg did not support it (Mason 2013), (parliament.uk).

4. Expected development of the British-European relationship

How will or will not continue the cooperation of the UK and the EU? Before any evaluation, it is to be recalled that the British membership brings to the country indisputable benefits of free trade within the European single market. The share of British trade of the EC's and later of the EU's total trade has been relatively high, with the peak in the 1980's. Since the 1990's, the percentage averages around 54% (Allen 2012: 18-19). However, it is yet to be taken into account rather anti-European British public and disunited coalition government.

As already indicated, any future scenarios of Britain's relationship to the EU have to be based on both historical development and current situation. Regarding the long-term aspects of this relationship particularly described in the first chapter, we can't, by definition, expect big changes in the short term. Therefore, we summarize the possible future development of the relationship of the UK and the EU on the basis of changes of the short-term determinants on the background of the long-term aspects.

Further complications in the British-European relationship

Taking into account the above-defined short-term determinants of the relationship - the approach of the British government, public opinion and trade, and the assumption that this relationship will worsen to some extent, we would come to a few conclusions. All of them will be based on the release of ties with the European integration process and for some of them is even possible an increase of trade costs.

Booth and Howarth (2012: 3) summarize options available for the UK in this respect. Based on this, we define three scenarios of "released" cooperation of the UK and the EU. Firstly, there is a possibility that in the context of the European Parliament elections a major wave of Euroscepticism will raise and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) will win, and moreover, this party will retain much of the favour of its electorate until the general election planned for 2015. Assuming that the British government would get greatly influenced by this result, it could negotiate such conditions with the EU that would lead to liberation of the UK from the common agricultural, fisheries and regional policy and also from the contributions to the common budget. However, the UK could not further intervene in EU negotiations and influence future conditions of the single market. Existing conditions of British participation in the single European market would remain unchanged as the costs of trade, at least in the shorter term. For realization of this kind of cooperation would have to be signed some form of association agreement. In the end, a final exit from the EU would not be unrealistic.

Not so radical option would be a cooperation in the form of participation in the European Economic Area, although it could lead to some revision of the EU membership. Nevertheless, the membership itself would be retained. This possibility also rise of euroscepticism, however, this trend would not be reflected to a higher extent in the general election and the traditional

parties would keep their electorate. This option also does not include British participation in some of the common European policies, however, it implies a necessity of limited contributions to the EU budget and also limited possibility of the British government to negotiate special trade conditions. Although eurosceptic moods have increased during the economic crisis in the UK, the economic recovery is taking place now and thus also a possibility of more favourable attitudes of British voters to the EU is opened (House of Commons 2013).

The third scenario could be signing of bilateral agreements with all Member States separately. However, these agreements would be dependent on a very large scale of eventualities. This scenario would not only assume a preceding stronger wave of euroscepticism and related UKIP success in the general election in 2015, but also very strong reaction of the traditional political parties leading to highly increased efforts to negotiate with each Member State such agreements. The question is whether it would be efficient at all to conduct such negotiations. Member States are integrated into the EU in order to lead negotiations together.

Extensive integration of the UK into the EU

Extensive integration into European structures would be real only when the EU itself would change. This option has been already admitted by the British government in July 2012. However, there was a strong assumption in this governmental statement that the Eurozone crisis would qualitatively transform the EU and that it would lead to a more flexible European integration in a form of connected network. Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand such statements with respect to the traditional British way of preference of the intergovernmental cooperation. The change in this regard could not expected in the close future (Brown 2012: 3-4).

Continuing the trend of the “awkward” partner

Year 2013 started by a great manifestation of the Prime Minister about the relationship between the UK and the EU and it has been also ended by discussions about the role of the UK in the European integration. Like at the beginning of 2013, David Cameron was trying to convince his own party not to approve too hasty referendum on withdrawal from the EU in the end of the year. Finally, the EU Referendum Bill did not pass the House of Lords at the beginning of

2014. It should be noted that the upper chamber of the British Parliament has a Labour majority. Cameron's European policy is therefore not too much supported by his own party.

Another question mark regarding the future British-European relationship would be a fact that the renegotiation of the EU terms depends on future outcome of general elections planned for 2015. Meanwhile, British entrepreneurs' lobby is seeking to remain in the EU under current conditions, because the most important entrepreneurs fear from investments reduction that would follow a possible withdrawal or re-negotiation of the amended membership. For these reasons, it is not clear so far, how the question of the membership conditions will develop in the upcoming years (Fox 2013).

Despite the British critical position that often impeded the progress of European integration, the UK has contributed extensively to form today's EU. According to Vaquer (2011), the UK is not only the country of eurosceptics, but also a place from where a large number of defenders of European integration and creators of common European policies came. This author also mentions his opinion that the UK would never allow national monopolies, such as telecommunications companies or airlines, to gain too much power at the European single market and thus undermine free competition. If the British decided to leave the EU, this community would lose a lot not only in military, academic and financial areas, but it would also lose a member state that is not afraid of innovation in the public sector and bureaucracy. Therefore we can assume that the trend of the UK as the "awkward" EU partner would persist. All historical and economical and also political and social characteristics of the country evidence long-term existence that could not be expected to change in a shorter term.

5. Conclusion

Concerning the historical development of the UK's relationship with the EU, the today's development seems to be just a variation on the same old themes. However, it should be noted that a debate on the membership referendum had been led forty years ago for a last time and since then much has changed. Renegotiation of the membership terms or even the "Brexit" would now have much greater consequences for the British economy than it would have been in the 1970's. There is a new phenomenon - existence of a "one theme party" – the UKIP,

whose aim is a withdrawal from the EU. This party is gaining more and more supporters at the expense of the ruling Conservatives. On the other hand, the arguments of the business lobby are also very strong. This paper first defined the specifics of the British EU membership that has been analysed on the basis of current European policy of the coalition government. Furthermore, it draws possible future scenarios of the Euro-British relationship. The most likely possibility seems to be the trend of remaining an “awkward” partner. The UK will remain a member of the EU, however, the British will try to go along their intergovernmental expectations, consistent with the continuity of British European policy.

6. Resources

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