

The British election as seen from Europe

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Today's general election in the UK has sparked disquiet and concern in Europe's ruling circles, particularly in Germany. It is regarded as a source of economic instability and a step towards the fracturing of the European Union into its national and regional components.

While leading politicians—not least for fear outside interference could boost anti-EU sentiments—are holding back on their comments, the leading media have published analysis and editorials which also include the views of big business representatives.

Financial Times columnist Wolfgang Münchau, who is well connected in Germany, commented, “The aftermath of the British elections is one of the most pressing issues on the minds of EU policymakers. It ranks some distance behind a breakdown of the Minsk II ceasefire agreement in Ukraine, but some way ahead of a sudden Greek exit from the euro zone.”

Many editorials accuse both the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and his Labour challenger Ed Miliband of opportunist adaptation and a lack of leadership.

Münchau finds it astonishing that “given the importance of this Thursday's elections for Britain's future in the EU, Europe has played hardly any role in the debate.”

Die Zeit refers to the election campaign as “intra British navel-gazing”. Britain has become “provincial” and “self-absorbed”. Cameron, “in the eyes of the other European countries”, is letting himself “be driven by the Eurosceptics in his own party and the anti-EU UKIP”.

The right-wing *Die Welt* accuses the prime minister of wanting to “win over nationalist and Euro-critical voters” and that he has become “the prisoner of his own rhetoric.”

Several editorials express concern that the outcome of the election could result in a long period of political and economic instability, which could then spread to the whole of Europe. Since all available forecasts show neither the Tories nor Labour winning a majority, they expect protracted coalition talks, with the end result being a chronically unstable government.

“In this complex situation, a stable new coalition emerging is rather unlikely,” says *Spiegel Online*, “and that in a country whose economy is still on rather shaky legs. ... Economic and political shock waves could spread from London that will also be felt far beyond the British Isles.”

The news magazine expects that the stock markets will record declines and the value of the pound will fall “if the impression of political instability solidifies on Friday. ... For a country whose business model is based on the constant influx of foreign capital, that would be a very unpleasant situation.”

Frankfurter Allgemeine adds that the dependence on capital inflows would have dire consequences in the event of political instability. The current UK account deficit of “around 140 billion euros a year” corresponds to “5.5 percent of economic output—a lonely record among major industrialized countries”, the paper writes.

However, the fears of the effects of a Brexit, a possible withdrawal of Britain from the European Union, run far deeper than concerns over the conjunctural impact of the election. Cameron had already announced two years ago that he would let the people vote on this question in 2017 if he were elected for a second term.

So far, he has spoken in favour of Britain remaining in the EU, but only if it grants significant concessions—which, given the complex relations between the 28 member states, is virtually impossible. Public opinion in Britain appears currently to lean in favour of remaining in the EU, but given the uncertain international situation, it is impossible to predict the result of a referendum in two years.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine* believes that the uncertainty of the outcome of a referendum alone would have serious consequences. “Domestic or foreign companies could shelve investment plans or even leave the country faced with the years of stalemate expected.”

A victory for Ed Miliband, who represents a more EU-friendly view, would not in the long run solve the problem in the view of the newspaper. It is to be expected that the Tories in opposition “will be dominated by Eurosceptics” and could win the next elections “with an anti-EU campaign”, it states.

In the *Financial Times*, Wolfgang Münchau points out that even Labour holds an increasingly Eurosceptic view. In the party's 83-page election manifesto, the topic of the EU takes up little more than a page, where it claims it will “change the EU in the best interests of Britain” and “protect our national interest”. The EU's interests are not mentioned at all.

In addition to economic questions, several editorials deal with the political and strategic consequences of a Brexit. They see this as the beginning of the end of the European Union.

According to *Spiegel Online*, a British decision against the EU would be “a shrill signal”. It states: “For the first time, a country—and especially such a large, important and central one—would voluntarily withdraw from the EU. Other Eurosceptic countries could follow. European integration as a whole would be in question.”

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine* also warns of the “signal effect” of such a move: “A ‘Brexit’ provides an example that European

integration—and thus also the internal market—are not irreversible.”

The newspaper cites financial and policy experts, according to whom a Brexit would be “likely to lead to the dismantling of the United Kingdom”. It warns of a “momentous chain reaction of ‘Brexit’ and ‘Sexit’ [the secession of Scotland].” What is “all the more astonishing,” is that “the important topic of Europe has so far played only a minor role in the British election campaign itself”, the paper concludes.

Die Welt compares the potential consequences of a Brexit with the “financial crisis of 2008-2009.” The “risks for the rest of Europe are enormous, not least for Germany”, which would “lose an important ally”. London had, “just like Chancellor Angela Merkel, always insisted that the EU needs to be competitive as a whole. Without England, the preponderance of the southern states, including France, would be almost overwhelming.”

The French newspaper *Le Figaro* also wants to prevent a Brexit. It accuses Cameron of “pursuing a chaotic European policy, of taking a failed gamble and of posing hazardous ultimatums”, and of accepting “the risk of a ‘Brexit’ in face of a sceptical electorate”. If he was re-elected, Europeans would have to help him out of this trap, “Since the EU needs British dynamism and its model of success.”

The *Irish Times* warns of the “enormously damaging” consequences for Ireland: “British withdrawal from the EU would be a huge shock to the whole European project and to its global influence and reputation”. It “would have deep implications for Irish business, agriculture, social policy, financial services, trade and energy.” It would be extremely damaging “to the close relationship built up between Dublin and London. Irish-British relations would revert to a damaging bilateralism based more on power relations than interdependence.” And it would profoundly unsettle Northern Ireland, politically and economically.

Journalist Christoph von Marschall, of public radio broadcaster Deutschlandfunk, paints a picture of an “existential crisis” of the EU. One should no longer treat the European trouble spots separately, he warns. If one takes together the risks of a Greek bankruptcy, a fracture of the sanctions front against Putin, a withdrawal of Britain from the European Union and an election victory of Marine Le Pen in the French presidential election in 2017, it will “suddenly be clear that the EU Europe as we know it will probably soon cease to exist.”

Reading these warnings coming mainly from the conservative, business-oriented media, one would assume that the ruling elites would do everything possible to stop an impending economic disaster and the disintegration of the continent into conflicting parts. One could add surveys of British, European and American business leaders who warn overwhelmingly of the devastating consequences of a Brexit.

Nevertheless, the centrifugal forces and contradictions in Europe are growing. This cannot be explained by the personal failings of politicians like Cameron and Miliband, nor with the growing pressure of right-wing populists like Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen. More fundamental objective forces are at work.

The global crisis of capitalism, which has deepened since the 2008 financial crisis, is exacerbating national and social tensions everywhere. Europe is no exception. In the short term, an EU

breakup might have devastating economic consequences, but in the long term this is outweighed by strategic considerations.

Is the British ruling class really served by remaining in a European Union in which Germany rises seemingly unstoppably to become the dominant economic and political power? Should Paris play second fiddle to Berlin, or orient more closely to Moscow or Washington, with which Germany could come into conflict? Is it really in the interests of Germany to hold together an EU of 28 states, or is it better to retreat to a core Europe and use the freed-up funds to build up the military?

These and similar considerations play a role in the background.

Christopher Clark called his bestseller about the First World War, “The Sleepwalkers”. The title tends to understate the criminal determination with which the protagonists pushed towards war. But it is true in so far as they—like sleepwalkers—were no longer accessible to “rational” arguments. Driven by imperialist and class interests, they marched with open eyes into the catastrophe.

The situation is similar in Europe today. The warnings that the continent is heading for a disaster must be taken seriously. The answer, however, does not lie in defending the European Union. This tool of the most powerful business and financial interests is the driving force behind the social division of the continent and the emergence of national antagonisms. The EU is organizing the attacks on the working class, it is driving forward rearmament at home and abroad, and it serves as a battleground upon which the European powers are struggling for supremacy.

The only way to unite Europe on a progressive basis is through the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe. The defence of social and democratic rights, the opposition to war and militarism, the fight against the European Union and the unification of the European working class on the basis of an anti-capitalist, socialist programme are inseparable components of this struggle.



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