

UK Prime Minister Cameron tours Europe lobbying for EU reforms

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UK Prime Minister David Cameron's week-long diplomatic offensive in Europe finished on an apparent high, Friday, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel indicated that the Lisbon treaty might be revised in line with his demands.

However, in doing so, she stressed that European integration would proceed, but on the basis of a "two-speed" model that would leave Britain on the outside of a Franco-German core.

The Tories are committed to holding an in/out referendum on continued membership in the European Union (EU) before the end of 2017—though they would like to hold one earlier in 2016, given the impact of such political uncertainty on Britain's economy.

Cameron is demanding a UK exclusion from the EU drive for "ever closer union", additional powers for parliament to block EU legislation and measures to curtail the freedom of movement of European citizens, including limits on welfare payments for new migrants, forcing those working to wait four years before claiming in-work benefits and no right of entry for the citizens of accession countries to the EU.

He has calculated that his newly-won majority in the May 7 general election and threat to leave the EU will strengthen his hand. Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond warned, "The prime minister is very clear in dealing with European counterparts that if we are not able to deliver on these big areas of concern the British people have, we will not win the referendum."

In the main, such assumptions have proved to be false. None of the EU leaders want Britain to leave, as this would be a devastating blow—especially with the threat of a Greek exit from the euro zone, Spain's ruling Popular Party suffering heavy losses in regional elections, and the election of Andrzej Duda of the right-wing and anti-EU Law and Justice party (PiS) as Polish

president.

But Cameron was met with sometimes unconcealed resentment for threatening the stability of the EU at such a time and for making demands that run counter to the interests of other member states. In addition, many calculate that Cameron is engaging in political theatre and will be amenable to a face-saving agreement.

That is why, on revising the Lisbon treaty, Merkel said it was first necessary to clarify "what needs to be changed. Is it necessary to change the treaty, can it be changed via a secondary process? But, of course, if you are convinced of a content, of a substance, then we shouldn't be saying, well, to change the treaty is totally impossible."

Merkel said that Germany hoped "Britain is going to stay in the EU." However regarding the demand that Britain is given an opt-out from the EU's 1957 Treaty of Rome pledge to create an "ever closer union" she countered, "The Europe of two speeds is effectively our reality today ... and I have no problem at all to have this principle of different speeds in the future."

This was a fairly unambiguous declaration that Germany and France have set out to dominate a core group of EU countries, with the UK on the periphery of the single market along with weaker and often crisis-ridden economies such as Greece.

A measure of German hostility to Cameron's actions was provided by Volker Treier, the deputy chief executive of Germany's chamber of commerce and industry. After describing the decision to hold a referendum as "astonishing", he was asked by the BBC how far Merkel should go in accommodating Britain's requests. "Our recommendation is not to deal under such circumstances," he replied.

Before Germany, the prime minister visited the Netherlands, France and Poland—during the last two

days of a “charm offensive” beginning last week at the Eastern Partnership Forum in Riga, where he spoke with the leaders of Sweden, Hungary, Latvia, Bulgaria and Poland, followed by dinner on Monday with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker.

Cameron had originally intended to visit Denmark, but the growing instability within Europe prevented this. Though Denmark has successfully negotiated some opt-outs from the Lisbon Treaty, Cameron would not have been given a warm welcome even had he attended. Danish Prime Minister, Helle Thorning Schmidt, is attempting to fend off her conservative rivals by striking an anti-austerity pose.

In the Netherlands, Cameron received his warmest welcome. At The Hague, he said the UK and the Netherlands were “old friends and like-minded allies”. Of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, he said, “We have worked together on making sure that the European budget is under control, we have worked together on trade deals with other parts of the world, we have worked together on strong, pro-market, pro-enterprise agenda. So we will discuss all that and my plans for European reform.”

He was referring to a 2013 Dutch proposal calling for less EU regulation and support for an extension of the free market to cover services.

In Poland, where the government also shares the right-wing economic nostrums of the UK Tories, Cameron’s policy on welfare rights for EU migrants nevertheless guaranteed him a frosty reception.

After a breakfast meeting with Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz, a Downing Street spokesperson said, “There was much they could agree on: making Europe more competitive by strengthening the single market, cutting back red tape, ensuring fairness between euro-ins and euro-outs and more subsidiarity, respecting the sovereignty of member states.”

He added, in a masterpiece of understatement, that “there were issues concerning the interaction between free movement and national welfare systems that should be discussed further.”

Kopacz issued a statement that she had told Cameron how she “strongly opposed measures that may lead to discrimination against Poles and other EU citizens seeking legal employment in the UK.” Some 700,000 Polish citizens reside and work in Britain.

Of greater significance still was the fairly hostile

reception Cameron received in France, a country occupying a special position of enmity for the Tory right and the UK Independence Party, who view France as representative of all that is wrong with over-regulated European capitalism.

Cameron has spent several years seeking to force a wedge between Berlin and Paris, exploiting Germany’s own desire for greater economic deregulation. But even before his visit to President Francois Hollande at the Elysée Palace, the leaking of a document to *Le Monde*, indicating that France and Germany were committed to maintaining existing EU treaties, suggested the tone of Thursday’s events.

Hollande, who faces a Presidential election in 2017, in which the anti-EU National Front is shaping up as a major rival, stressed that there is no desire in France for EU treaty change. Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius had earlier warned, “We want Britain to stay in the EU. We support improvements to the Union but we cannot agree to dismantling it.”

Fabius acknowledged how dangerous the situation has become for the European bourgeoisie when he added that “The United Kingdom is one of the world’s biggest economies. It is a military power and a diplomatic power. If such an important country left the European Union, it would create an extremely negative impression of Europe.”

Cameron intends to speak to the leaders of all 27 EU member states before a European council summit on June 25. His frantic shuttle diplomacy will not only be a focus for growing inter-imperialist hostilities between the crisis-ridden European powers, but it will also deepen divisions within ruling circles in Britain over Cameron’s dangerous gamble with fundamental national and commercial interests that are tied to Britain’s access to European markets, as well as its ability to exert political and military influence on the continent on behalf of both itself and the United States.



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