

UCL Constitution Unit Briefing Paper

Brexit: The Consequences for Other EU Member States

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This is the fourth in a series of Constitution Unit [briefing papers](#) on the constitutional consequences of Brexit. The papers are intended to inform debate ahead of the UK referendum on EU membership on 23 June. They do not take sides in that debate.

The paper is based on a Constitution Unit seminar on the impact of Brexit on other EU member states. Remarks made by our panellists – Brian O’Connell, UK Consultant Director of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, Sara Hagemann, Assistant Professor at the LSE European Institute, Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska, Research Fellow at the Centre for European Reform, and Alan Posener, Correspondent on Politics and Society for *Die Welt* – have contributed significantly to the paper. Given our panellists’ backgrounds, we draw primarily on examples from Ireland, Denmark, Poland and Germany.

There are many ways in which Brexit would affect other member states. This paper focuses on the political and constitutional implications of Brexit, rather than the economic and social impact. The evidence indicates that:

- The stances that states would adopt in Brexit negotiations would be influenced both by domestic politics and by economic considerations. Some states would treat the UK more favourably than others.
- Brexit could embolden Eurosceptic movements in countries such as Denmark and Austria. This could lead to calls for similar referendums, and, in the extreme, perhaps even to the unravelling of the EU.
- Brexit would alter member states’ relative strength within the EU. States that previously drew on UK support would be weakened, whereas Germany could be strengthened.
- Ireland would be particularly affected by Brexit. Beyond the economic impact, the peace process could be undermined and border controls between the Republic and the North might need to be re-established.

How do other EU member states view Brexit?

A recent [EU-wide poll](#) commissioned by Lord Ashcroft shows that 60 per cent of the public in the 27 other member states want the UK to remain in the EU; only 10 percent want it to leave. Support for UK membership varies greatly. Lithuania, Malta, Portugal and Ireland are keenest for the UK to stay, while Austria, Cyprus, France and Luxembourg are least concerned.

Our panellists stressed that, in most countries, the UK’s referendum is an elite interest – it worries politicians and business leaders, but it is not (yet) a mainstream public concern. Ireland is the clearest exception. Poland is a partial exception too, as potential effects of Brexit on the many Polish citizens living in the UK feature strongly in public debate.



How would the member states approach the Brexit negotiations?

A vote for Brexit would lead to complex withdrawal negotiations between the UK and the EU. The withdrawal process set out in Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty accords each member state a veto on extending the two-year negotiation period, thereby giving remaining states [the upper hand](#). So it is important to consider how different EU states would approach the negotiations.

In our [briefing paper](#) on the impact of Brexit on the EU, Simon Hix argued that both economic and political factors would shape the EU's negotiating stance. Economic interests would favour allowing the UK to depart smoothly, with a generous trade deal. But the potential contagion effect of Brexit means this might not serve the EU's political interests. Brexit could unleash Eurosceptic forces, who would point to the UK example as a blueprint for their own country's withdrawal. The UK should therefore not expect a painless departure.

Our panellists agreed that the EU would want to prevent any Brexit domino effect. Alan Posener said Germany and France might want to 'punish the UK for leaving' in order to safeguard wider European unity. But they would also tread carefully: a buoyant Front National in France, for example, would seize any opportunity to accuse President Hollande of 'punishing' British voters for exercising their democratic rights.

Some other states would have good reasons to treat the UK kindly. For example:

- Given Ireland's deep economic, political and social connections to the UK, its strong interest lies in preserving close relations. Brian O'Connell suggested that 'Ireland will support the UK in any way possible'.
- The Nordic member states (Denmark, Sweden and Finland) are the UK's natural allies in the EU, supporting free trade and open markets. They would want the UK to remain in the single market, or at least to exert influence on it, to prevent a protectionist turn. Trade with the UK is also extremely important for them.
- Poland has also an interest in keeping the UK in the single market post-Brexit: the UK is the second largest importer of Polish goods. However, Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska stressed that Poland, which is the [biggest net beneficiary](#) from the EU budget, would likely ask the UK to continue to pay into the EU's budget and maintain free movement of EU workers in exchange for unlimited access to the single market.

In sum, although the EU would likely play a hard game with the UK – and [Whitehall would face a challenging period of negotiations](#) – some member states would be sympathetic to the UK's case for domestic reasons.

On the other hand, some other states could be distinctly unsympathetic. It should be remembered that some, such as Romania and Slovenia, export very little to the UK.

Long-term effects of Brexit

If Brexit were to occur, it would have significant effects not just for economic prosperity in other member states (which we do not cover in this paper, but which is addressed, for example, [here](#)), but also for domestic politics in those states and for states' relative strength and weakness within EU decision-making processes.



Brexit and the strength of Euroscepticism across Europe

As the chart below shows, attitudes towards EU membership vary widely across the continent. Euroscepticism is rife in Denmark, Austria, Sweden and the Czech Republic (and, of course, in the UK). In contrast, citizens of Malta, Spain, Ireland and Poland feel extremely positive about the EU. Other polls show that, on average, just [40 per cent](#) of EU citizens ‘trust’ the EU.

How positive or negative do you feel about your country’s membership of the EU?



Data from [Lord Ashcroft Polls](#), Feb 2016

Brexit could empower and embolden Eurosceptic movements in other member states. In particular, if the UK negotiated a favourable withdrawal deal, with high levels of market access, this would be seized upon by Eurosceptics elsewhere, who would argue that their country should seek a similar deal, or at least some reconfiguration of their relations with the EU.

Simon Hix ranks Denmark, Austria and Sweden as most at ‘risk’ of a Brexit-induced anti-EU backlash. The Eurosceptic Danish People’s Party is now the country’s second largest party, and its leader, [Kristian Thulesen Dahl](#), wants a referendum on EU membership. Sara Hagemann argued that a vote for Brexit would indeed most likely lead in time to a similar referendum in Denmark. She doubted, however, that Denmark would actually leave the EU, given the lack of political and public will for such a radical move.

In last month’s presidential election in Austria, the candidate of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), Norbert Hofer, only narrowly lost, clinching [49.7% of the vote](#). He argued throughout the campaign that Austria should follow the UK’s lead in dealing with the EU. Other Eurosceptic parties that Brexit could strengthen include Marine Le Pen’s Front National in France and the German Alternative für Deutschland. Brexit could even affect a country such as Italy: a May 2016 [Ipsos poll](#) found that 48 per cent of Italians said they would vote to leave the EU in a referendum.

Our panel suggested that Brexit could even lead to the unravelling of the EU. Sara Hagemann and Alan Posener were particularly concerned: if other countries followed the UK out, the EU could eventually collapse. Some people, of course, would welcome this outcome. But Alan Posener expressed deep worries about its potential to strengthen Russian influence across the continent. On the other hand, as explored in our [previous briefing paper](#), the EU has a good track record of muddling through crises and could even end up more united and cohesive after Brexit.



The impact of Brexit on member states' positions within the EU

Alan Posener argued that Brexit would put Germany in an undesirable position: leading a union of dependent states. He noted that Europe's other major powers – France, Spain and Italy – are either in decline or in political turmoil, and that Germany needs the UK to help it lead the EU. Brexit might require Germany to assume a position of even greater leadership and authority – something that very few Germans want. [Some analysts](#) have also noted that, without the UK, Germany would be expected to contribute more to European defence and security.

Brexit could weaken those states within the EU that benefit from UK support:

- Free trade is a key policy area where Brexit's impact would be felt. In our previous [briefing paper](#), we argued that Brexit could make the EU more protectionist: the states with protectionist inclinations (e.g., France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal and Cyprus) would have a [blocking minority](#) in the Council, whereas the liberally inclined states would not.
- Brexit could undermine the non-Eurozone member states. [Tim Oliver argues](#) that the Eurozone might replace the single market as the EU's core. [Roderick Parkes suggests](#) that non-Eurozone countries like Poland would be able to protect their interests only by articulating their firm commitment to joining the euro, which the current government in Poland is reluctant to do.
- Poland is currently in a [dispute with the European Commission](#) over concerns that its government is undermining the rule of law. David Cameron has been [sympathetic to Poland](#) and has stood up for it at European Council meetings. Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska says the Polish government sees London as its key EU ally, and that Brexit would weaken Warsaw's ability to resist pressure from Brussels.
- Malta opposes EU tax harmonisation, which it claims would damage its economy. Implementing this requires unanimous consent in the Council, which the UK has blocked. [Roderick Pace argues](#) that, without the UK, Malta would lack the clout to get its way.

Would other member states demand a 'special status' in the EU?


If Britain leaves the EU, other member states – especially those where a significant Eurosceptic upsurge is likely – might seek to review their own relationships with the EU. There could thus be demands for opt-outs and other reforms. [Arnold Kammel claims](#) that this is a distinct possibility in Austria, especially in light of the recent presidential elections and rise of the FPÖ.

But some states might seek to review their membership terms even if the UK does not leave, as the special status for the UK agreed in February would then come into effect. Other states might, for example, seek to opt out from ['ever closer union'](#).

Case study: The impact of Brexit on the Republic of Ireland

Brexit would have a greater impact on Ireland than on any other member state:

- the level of trade between the two countries means Brexit could harm Ireland's economy;
- border controls may have to be established between the Republic and Northern Ireland;
- the EU has underpinned the Northern Ireland peace process; Brexit could undermine it.



Levels of trade between the UK and Ireland are extremely high, worth between [£800m and £1bn per week](#). Ireland imports more from the UK than from any other country and is the UK's [fifth largest](#) export market. Brexit would undoubtedly have an impact on this trade. Whichever type of trade deal is negotiated, there would be new barriers to trade. Even without tariffs, customs checks would be needed. This could [damage](#) Ireland's economy.

No one is certain what the border between the Republic and the North would look like. Brian O'Connell points out that Brexit would give the UK government a right to tighten border controls. He sees it as unlikely that the current Common Travel Area between Ireland and the UK could survive, as Ireland would then be the EU's 'backdoor' into the UK. Theresa Villiers, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, argues that the border debate is a red herring, and that after Brexit it would be '[perfectly possible to maintain free movement with Irish citizens](#)'. But hers is not a mainstream opinion. Former Irish Prime Minister [Bertie Ahern](#), in common with many experts, thinks some form of border – whether a customs border or a passport border – would be required. This could have a significant political, economic and symbolic impact and be [highly disruptive](#) for people's lives. We explore these issues further in a [previous briefing paper](#).

The Irish government and the UK referendum

The Irish government [opposes](#) Brexit. During the referendum campaign, Irish representatives have occupied something of a diplomatic grey area. There are over 400,000 first-generation Irish nationals in the UK, and many more people of Irish heritage, all of whom are allowed to vote. Brian O'Connell says Irish diplomats and politicians have done everything they can 'within diplomatic bounds' to persuade these people to register and vote Remain: speaking at events, writing articles and delivering press conferences. There have also been [social media campaigns](#), featuring [Bob Geldof](#) and former Irish President [Mary McAleese](#), among others.

[Various experts](#) also highlight that the EU has supported the peace process in Northern Ireland. Shared EU membership has underpinned this process on a political level and, since 1995, the EU has contributed over €1.3 billion to programmes and initiatives via the [European Peace and Reconciliation Fund](#). Brian O'Connell questions whether the Treasury would show the same munificence.

O'Connell also notes that peace in Northern Ireland is underpinned by economic prosperity and development, a view shared by [Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny](#). Both agree that the EU has played a significant role in the development of the Northern Irish economy. For these reasons, Kenny argues that Brexit could undermine the stability of the peace process.

Summary

Brexit would affect every member state. It would have a significant economic, social and political impact on Ireland, whose government is extremely concerned about the referendum result. It would also affect domestic politics in other states, fuelling Euroscepticism in some. In addition, Brexit would variously affect the positions of different states within the EU. States that previously drew on UK support would be weakened, whereas Germany – and the Eurozone states – could become more dominant.

This UCL Constitution Unit briefing paper is part of a [project](#) on the Constitutional Consequences of Brexit for the UK and EU, which is funded by the 'UK in a Changing Europe' initiative based at King's College London. The project consists of a series of four seminars, each accompanied by a briefing paper and video. Much of the material in this paper is adapted from the fourth seminar, on 2 June. Brian O'Connell, Professor Sara Hagemann, Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska and Alan Posener were our panellists, and, without their contributions, this paper would not have been possible. The series is convened by Dr Christine Reh, Dr Alan Renwick and Professor Meg Russell.