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Working Paper №12, 2015 (№12)

To Win Battle without Losing War

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The talks between Great Britain and the European Union on the change of conditions of the UK EU membership have come to the final phase. David Cameron sent an official letter to the President of the European Council setting out the areas where he is seeking reforms. He also made his position public speaking at Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

The main demands for European Union reform areas set out by Great Britain boil down to the following.

1. The European Union has to recognize the rights of the EU members outside of the euro zone and prevent their discrimination (to let the countries outside of the euro zone take part in the euro zone decision making process).
2. Bolstering national parliaments. The 2009 Lisbon treaty gave national parliaments the right to police subsidiarity through the creation of a so-called 'yellow card' system – a virtual veto. This allows a third or more of them, acting together, to veto or temporarily block draft laws proposed by the European Commission. Cameron wants to strengthen the 'yellow card' procedure.
3. Exempting Britain from «ever-closer union» (the European super state). It would require amending the Lisbon Treaty, something that cannot be done, at least till 2017.
4. Restricting EU migrants' access to in-work benefits.

Cameron is focused on financial issues (the interests of London City) and parliamentary sovereignty (who rules?), but the British people are more concerned over immigration. The citizens' vision of the UK's place and role in the European Union is distorted. Many ordinary people have skewed perceptions of the financial costs of the EU membership. They believe the UK's contribution into the EU budget to be four times higher than it is in reality¹.

They also believe the numbers of newly arrived immigrants to be two times more than in real life – 24% of the whole population compared with 13% in actuality. The majority wants to preserve the access to European markets, but doesn't want to be part of the political union (points 3 and 4 in the Cameron's letter)². Their opinion may depend on the popularity of the government at the moment of referendum and the stereotypes shaping their perception of the European Union instead of facts.

The main argument of Cameron destined for internal audience is that the EU membership is first and foremost the issue of national security, not economy. Britain should not be in the position of someone obliged to abide by the rules of others. He dismisses the Norway model, which might turn Britain into a rule-taker, not a rule-maker. Thus, Great Britain should stay in the Union.

To win the battle

Let me remind that Cameron took a very tough stand on the European Union as the leader of opposition. He changed his attitude becoming the head of coalition government in 2010 when the Prime Minister joined the ranks of membership supporters. He had to make concessions due to vibrant activities of Conservative eurosceptics putting into jeopardy the unity of his party. Moreover, Cameron was afraid that some voters may support the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) at the approaching parliamentary election of 2015. It made him promise (January 2013) to hold a referendum on Britain's EU membership. There were some strings attached to it: the Tories victory at the election and the talks with the European Union. It made him promise to hold a plebiscite till December 31, 2017.

It was rather easy to promise. A referendum could not be held while the country was ruled by coalition government (that is till the election of May 2015), because the pro-European Liberal Democrats were part of it. Furthermore, long before the election the polls predicted formation of «hung parliament» to bring another coalition government into office (with the Conservatives or without them). It would have absolved Cameron from his promise. But Cameron won the «battle» to benefit the party: Tories won majority in the parliament. The

¹ Raines Th. Research paper. Internationalism or Isolationism? The Chatham House–YouGov Survey. Europe programme. January 2015.

URL: <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/internationalism-or-isolationism-chatham-house-yougov-survey/>

² Preferences for Britain's future role in Europe. URL: <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3381/Preferences-for-Britains-future-role-in-Europe.aspx>. Published: 26 October 2015.

UKIP got only one seat. As a result, he faced a «war» – the PM had a much more complex and decisive mission to accomplish at strategic level.

The same thing happened when the referendum was held on the independence of Scotland. Cameron refused to include the second question into the referendum ballot (giving Scotland more power – devolution max). He relied on the surveys that for many years showed that the opponents of independence were much more numerous than the advocates of secession.

Before the referendum the support for independence had grown to exceed 50%. As a result, he had to promise devolution max in the run up to the plebiscite in order not to lose the war. Scotland voted against independence but the United Kingdom has to go through hard times trying to keep its state and political system unchanged.

The stance on the relationship with the European Union mirrors the fact that Scotland's influence inside the UK has grown. The stakes get higher for Cameron. Scotland wants to hold another referendum on independence in case the British say no to EU membership, because the majority of population in that part of the UK wants to stay in the Union.

Now the Prime Minister, who heads the one-party cabinet, has become a hostage to his own maneuvers aimed at accomplishment of tactical missions. As a result, he has much less wiggle room and the range of options continues to narrow down.

Not to lose the war

Inside the country eurosceptics in parliament defeated the government making approved the amendments to the bill on referendum. They inserted changes to the wording (in defiance of the government) to make it more balanced – a Yes or No question was changed to Remain or Leave. What was more important, they made the government set the date of referendum 4 months before the event instead of 4 weeks as the Prime Minister wanted initially. Thus, Cameron can no longer choose the moment when the public opinion towards the European Union is favorable. The people's attitude is fickle. Only 20% strongly support the idea of leaving the European Union, while 30% are convinced the United Kingdom should stay³. The recent surveys fail to give a definitive answer⁴. The situation in the European Union significantly influences the people's sentiment. You never know which side the public opinion will swing at the time of the vote.

Great Britain is facing an intense struggle. Some methods are used against the rules. For instance, press leaks. A leaked document has revealed that Britain's biggest business organization secretly urged ministers to tone down demands for winning back powers from

³ Haughton T. Farewell Britannia? "Issue Capture" and the Politics of Cameron's EU Referendum Pledge' (with Nathaniel Copsey), *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52 (s1), (2014), pp. 74-89.

⁴ October EU Referendum Poll. "REMAIN" LEADS BY 19 POINTS IN EU REFERENDUM POLL URL: <http://www.comres.co.uk/polls/october-eu-referendum-poll/>. See: Dahlgreen W. EU referendum: Brexit ahead by 2. URL: <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/09/28/eu-referendum-brexit-leads-2/>.

the EU. Sir Mike Rake, president of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), warned the Government not to «overplay» its negotiating position and risk provoking a rift with Brussels⁵. The situation is scandalous as the CBI was to express its opinion only after the talks with the European Union were over.

Naturally eurosceptics were skeptical towards the conditions for Great Britain to stay in the European Union outlined in the David Cameron's letter. «Is that it?»⁶, they asked. The demands put forward by the Prime Minister frustrated the EU membership supporters (asking too much), as well as opponents (asking too little).

The debates spilled into the realm of foreign policy. The Britain's dissatisfaction with its role in the European Union is added to the contradictions inside the organization – between the «old» and «new» (pro-American) Europe, between the national governments of member states and European bureaucracy in Brussels, between the European rich North and poor South. The divisions exacerbated as a result of Greek debt and the migration crisis against the background of Euroscepticism growing stronger throughout the entire European Union.

The US interference was also a factor to influence the development of events. For instance, Washington has warned London that the US relationship with the European Union as an institution is growing stronger. Philip Gordon, a senior official in the US State Department, said it was in America's interests to see a «strong British voice within the EU»⁷.

The United States speaks in increasingly harsh tone as the date of referendum gets closer. US trade representative Michael Froman said the US wouldn't sign a free trade deal with an independent UK⁸. Great Britain perceived this remark as an outright interference into its affairs in order to influence the outcome of the referendum. The outrage was even stronger due to the fact that Froman has been a member of the Forward Studies Unit (now it is known as the Bureau of European Policy Advisers) of the European Commission in Brussels which indicates a direct conflict of interest.

The position of the United States raises a question. How would Brexit influence the talks on Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) – the agreement to be signed between the United States and the European Union? Will it lead to three-party format, including Great Britain to complicate and slow down the negotiation process?

Reaching a deal on David Cameron's EU renegotiation goals will be «very, very tough», European Council President Donald Tusk has said. In his first comment since the UK Prime

⁵ URL: <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/616792/CBI-s-secret-pro-EU-push-revealed> - 3.11.2015.

⁶ Donald Tusk: Deal on UK's EU renegotiation 'very tough'. 12.11.2015. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-34803222>.

⁷ URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20961651>

⁸ US claims it WON'T sign a trade deal with UK if Britain leaves European Union. 31.10.2015. URL: <http://www.express.co.uk/finance/city/615829/US-trade-UK-Brexit-EU-trade-deal>; Outrage as US rep who made Brexit trade threats used to work for the European Commission. URL: <http://www.express.co.uk/finance/city/616730/US-trade-rep-Michael-Froman-Brexit-trade-threats-used-to-work-for-European-Commission?> 04.11.2015

Minister wrote to him setting out his objectives, Mr Tusk said there was «no guarantee» of a deal by December (the EU summit is scheduled to kick off on December 17)⁹. «I have to say that it will be really difficult to find an agreement», added the European Council President.

Does Great Britain have a chance of reaching a deal, even if after the middle of December? What will other EU member states say? Actually, the United Kingdom has the ear of Germany. Berlin realizes that Europe may have to move at different speeds in the future. France opposes the idea of «Europe to the order», where each and every country puts forward its own demands. Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands could be listed as UK's allies. At that, Spain and Belgium seriously oppose the Britain's intent to hinder the progress leading to an ever closer union.

East Europe opposes the limitations imposed on free movement of labor. Official estimates show there are now 1.3 million people born in newer EU member states living in the UK – just over half of them, or 688,000, Polish with 508,000 of them being in the UK labour force. Poland is now second only to India as the birthplace of most foreign-born residents of the UK. The last census (2011) also showed Polish becoming Britain's effective second language as the most widely spoken «main» language in the country after English and Welsh¹⁰. The relations between Great Britain and Poland have worsened as a result of discords on the issue of free labor force movement within the European Union. It made postpone the talks between the United Kingdom and the European Union till the Polish parliamentary election in October 2015.

Conclusions

There is a need to expedite the referendum: uncertainty may negatively affect British economy. In 2017 France will elect its next president and Germany will hold parliamentary election. Looks like 2016 is the best time for holding the referendum. Will Cameron avoid drawn-out talks and present any outcome of the talks as a success? Will he manage to prevent a split within the ranks of Conservative Party and convince the British people to vote for staying in the European Union? Will he achieve success in the endeavor to make Scotland remain part of the United Kingdom? Will David Cameron win the war?

Date of release: November 18, 2015.

This publication can be downloaded at: <http://ieras.ru/newspub.htm>

Originally published at: <http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2015/11/17/to-win-battle-without-losing-war.html>

⁹ Donald Tusk: Deal on UK's EU renegotiation 'very tough'. 12.11.2015.

URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-34803222>.

¹⁰ Polish workers in UK consider strike over anti-immigrant rhetoric. 04.08.2015. URL:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/11783297/Polish-workers-in-UK-consider-strike-over-anti-immigrant-rhetoric.html>