



What do Swedes think of Brexit? Photo: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda/Natacha Pisarenko

## 'This is why Sweden and the Nordics fear Brexit'

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**The Brits have some of their biggest fans in the Nordic countries, writes Per Tryding, deputy CEO of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Southern Sweden.**

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Ever since its inception in 1957, the EU has added one country after the other to its community. The United Kingdom joined in the big wave of 1973 along with Denmark, and Sweden came close to tagging along at the time, before eventually joining in 1995. The club has now reached 28 members.

But still, it's always the speculations about exits that trigger the most debate. Denmark has also been close to checking out, but the EU has always solved individual countries' scepticism in the same way, namely with patient flexibility. In fact, the EU has never actually forced itself on a member state and has been keen to seek compromises with the sceptics. However this is not an altogether uncontroversial strategy.

Some say that it is better to let sceptic nations go and focus on a smaller, hard core of ever-deeper integration. This was the big debate in the EU ahead of the eastern enlargement. But the Nordics and the UK pushed for a quick expansion of the EU and got what they wished for.

There is therefore a certain irony in the fact that this enlargement forms the basis of the referendum on a potential Brexit. Eastern European immigrants have probably played the biggest part in fuelling the UK's anti-EU party Ukip's successes and Ukip's polling figures were probably what in turn made its prime minister David Cameron risk a referendum. To the Nordic region, Brexit would definitely be a big setback both politically and financially, even if the political similarities are sometimes exaggerated.

The UK is one of Sweden's most important trading partners and Brexit would over time erode that relationship to the cost of billions for both parties. Culturally, the Brits have their biggest fans in the Nordic countries. You could say that Scandinavians are so in love with British culture that we sometimes find it difficult to see the flaws that do of course exist.

This is also the reason why the Nordics fear Brexit. It would give eurosceptics an enormous moral boost in the region. This despite the fact that the EU's critics in the UK – or mainly in England – are mainly found on the right of the political spectrum whereas they tend to be on the left in the Nordics.



*The author of the article, Per Tryding. Photo: Lars Lydig*

Regardless of its outcome, the referendum spells a political change for the UK. Referenda even on other issues could now become, following the votes on independence in Scotland and on the EU, more difficult to reject. And the relationship with the EU will also change. The Brits' scepticism towards Brussels is now determined by the people rather than the politicians and this is going to shift the dynamics of the debate.

For Britain, Brexit would mean a number of things. Financially it would without doubt be a major setback. The membership in 1973 was overshadowed by a dark economical period for the nation, but access to the inner market was an important reason why it bounced back in the 1980s. The EU contributes to half of the country's exports, so it is no small thing to create uncertainty when it comes to access to the EU's customers. Some sort of compensation agreement, similar to the one Switzerland has, will surely be created, but the Brits will then become passive subjects to other people's rules and not their co-creators.

And how relationships within the UK will change, between Scotland, Wales and England, is above all an open question. Perhaps it will no longer be possible to hold the union together if

the Scots, who are highly dependent on the EU for exports and culturally just a bit closer to the EU, would rather move closer to the EU than to the UK.

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Maybe the British government will have to offer different parts of the nation their own federation-like structure if the public votes to leave the European Union. A potential Brexit would likely change the EU less than it would affect Britain itself.

But the major strategic issue is more about the British, and indeed the European, self-image. How much weight do we really pull in a growing world? The UK is a major part of the EU, to be sure, and the EU is bigger than the UK, but increasingly smaller in the world.

**This opinion piece was written exclusively for The Local by [Per Tryding](#), deputy CEO of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Southern Sweden.**

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