



Keep calm and carry on.

What Europeans think about
a possible Brexit

Keep calm and carry on.

What Europeans think about a possible Brexit

Catherine de Vries & Isabell Hoffmann

Catherine de Vries

Professor of European Politics
University of Oxford
catherine.devries@politics.ox.ac.uk

Isabell Hoffmann

Head of eupinions
Bertelsmann Stiftung
isabell.hoffmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Description

The Eurozone crisis has pushed reform of the European Union (EU) to the forefront of political debate. How can a Union of 28 states with a population of over half a billion be reformed to weather future economic crises and political challenges? Finding an answer to this question is extremely difficult not only because current reform proposals are so varied, but even more so because we lack insights into the preferences for reform amongst national elites and publics. Although EU support has interested scholars for over three decades now, we virtually know nothing about public support for EU reform. Current research focuses almost exclusively on the causes of support for the current project and fails to provide a sufficient basis for effective reform decisions. Surely, the feasibility and sustainability of EU reform crucially hinges on the support amongst national publics. eupinions examines public support for EU reform by developing a theoretical model and employing cutting-edge data collection techniques. Our findings will aid policy makers to craft EU reform proposals that can secure widespread public support.

Executive Summary

A majority of Europeans would like the UK to remain a member of the European Union (EU), but at the same time they do not think that a Brexit would be the end of Europe. Whereas age or gender do not have a pronounced effect on how one views these matter, one factor clearly does: the more people support their own country's membership in the EU, the more they want the UK to remain a member as well. The opposite is not true, however. Eurosceptics are not rooting for the UK to leave. These public opinion trends are demonstrated by the Bertelsmann Stiftung's latest eupinions survey. eupinions conducts regular polls in all European member states to explore what European citizens think about current political issues. The latest wave of the survey is devoted to their views on the British referendum on membership in the EU.

The main results are:

- While a majority of continental European citizens thinks that Britain should remain a member of the EU, the support is, with 54 percent, not overwhelmingly high. What is more, a quarter of Europeans is not sure what to think about a possible Brexit, and 21 per cent think that the British should leave the Union.
- A majority of Germans, Italians, Poles and Spaniards prefer the UK to stay, while the French display much more skepticism. Only 41 per cent of the French respondents wishes the UK to stay, a quarter wishes them to leave the EU and about a third is not sure.
- While a large majority of EU supporters wishes the UK to remain, namely 72 per cent, only 30 per cent of Eurosceptics do. Interestingly though, it seems not to be the case that Eurosceptics would prefer the UK to leave. The proportion of sceptics supporting Brexit is 38 per cent, and close to the proportion of those wishing the UK to remain in the EU (30 per cent) or those who are not sure (32 per cent).
- While EU support strongly colours people's views on a possible Brexit, age and EU knowledge seem to have little effect.
- Among those with high and low EU knowledge a majority wishes the UK to stay in the EU, 58 and 50 per cent respectively.
- 45 of Europeans think that the EU will be economically weaker when the UK leaves. A third thinks that the EU will be less powerful in the world.
- 45 per cent of continental Europeans think that the EU would be worse off without the UK, while only 10 per cent think that the EU would be better off. Interestingly, a large proportion of Europeans are of the view that there will be little to no consequences for the EU when the British would decide to leave. 45 per cent think that the situation in the EU will remain the same with or without the UK.
- French, Italians and Spanish citizens think that the UK leaving would have a

little to no impact, while the majority of German and Polish citizens think that the EU would be worse off. Even in these two countries though the proportion of those that think that there will be little to no consequences for the EU is, with 41 per cent, quite substantial.

- A majority of continental Europeans perceives that the outcome of the Brexit referendum will have little impact on their own country. Moreover, even though a large proportion of Europeans think that the UK leaving might affect the EU negatively, an equally large proportion thinks that the EU will be largely unaffected.
- A majority of British citizens thinks that there will be almost no consequences for the EU when the UK decides to leave. 47 per cent of British respondents think that the situation in the EU will remain the same, while 43 percent think that the EU will be worse off when the UK would leave. Views about the Brexit matter here. While the majority (55 per cent) of Brexit supporters think that their country will be better off outside the EU, the majority of Brexit opponents (59 per cent) think that the UK will be worse off. A considerable proportion of Brexit supporters as well as opponents, namely about a third, are uncertain about the possible consequences of a Brexit for the UK.
- Finally, a comparison of the membership and integration preferences and level of EU knowledge of British respondents and those in the 5 largest member states suggests that Britons differ starkly from their continental European counterparts when it comes to their views about and knowledge of the EU. Continental Europeans hold more favourable views about the EU and display higher levels of EU knowledge.

In Focus

The British referendum and a possible Brexit

On the 23rd of June, British citizens will be able to decide whether their country should remain or leave the European Union (EU). Pundits and commentators have suggested that a possible Brexit might have grave consequences for both the EU and Great Britain. While a lot has been written about the contours of British public opinion, we know virtually nothing about how continental Europeans view a possible Brexit. Are continental Europeans sad to see the British leave, or would they rather see that the skeptical Britons finally exit? And how do continental Europeans view the consequences of a possible Brexit for the Union and their own country? Several times a year, eupinions conducts representative surveys of European public opinion on current political topics. In eupinions #2016/02 we interviewed 10 992 European citizens in all parts of the EU, 9 500 of them on the continent. The survey was conducted in April 2016 by Dalia Research Berlin.

We asked continental Europeans if they would like the UK to stay in the EU or leave. The results are reported in Figure 1 below. While a majority of continental European citizens thinks that Britain should remain a member of the EU, the support is with 54 percent not overwhelmingly high. What is more, a quarter of Europeans is not sure what to think about a possible Brexit, and 21 per cent of continental Europeans think that the British should leave the Union.

Next to our representative survey of the EU as a whole, we also conducted more in-depth studies of public opinion in the largest EU member states, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain. Figure 2 provides a break down of support for UK to remain in the EU in these five countries. A majority of Germans, Italians, Poles and Spaniards prefer the UK to stay. The French display much more skepticism. Only 41 per cent of the French respondents would like the UK to stay in the EU, a quarter wishes them to leave and about a third is not sure. These French results perhaps reflect common stereo-

FIGURE 1 EU-27: Slim majority of continental Europeans prefer the UK to remain

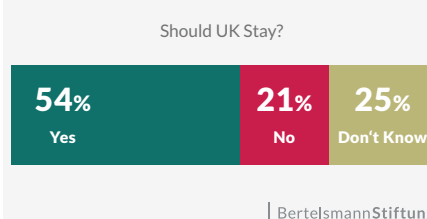


FIGURE 2 French are least positive about the UK remaining in the EU

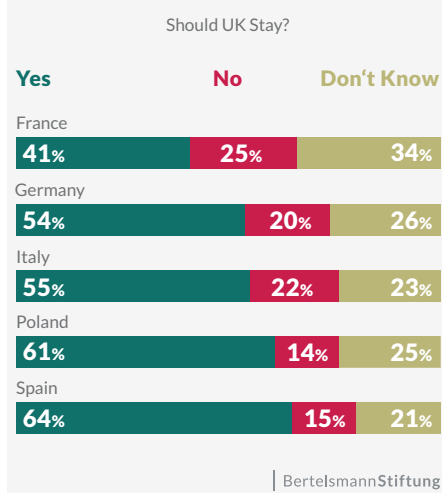


FIGURE 3 EU-27: EU support colours views about a possible Brexit

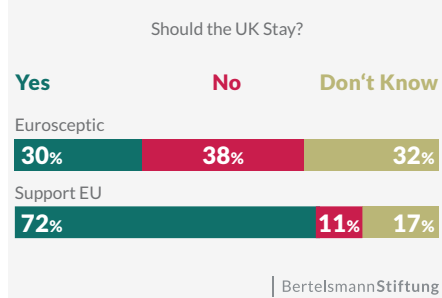
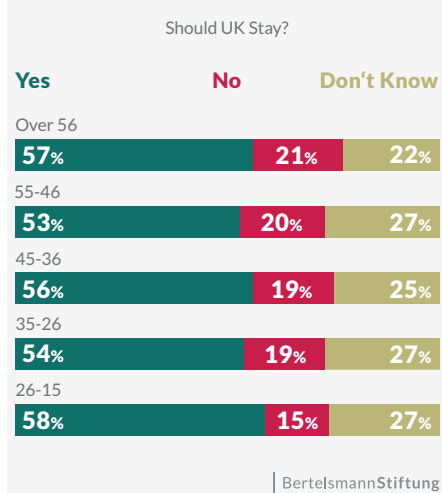


FIGURE 4 EU-27: Younger and older generations prefer the UK to remain



types about the relationship between France and the UK.

By-and-large, continental Europeans support the view that keeping the Union together is better than letting it break apart. They wish the UK to remain a member of the EU, even if the French are less enthusiastic.

So far, we have examined average support for or opposition to Brexit, what happens if we differentiate between EU supporters and sceptics, between younger and older cohorts or between those with low and high knowledge about the EU?

Figure 3 below compares preferences for a Brexit among those who support their own country's membership in the EU (EU supporters) and those who oppose it (Eurosceptics). A clear pattern emerges when we split opinion based on support for the EU. A large majority of EU supporters wishes the UK to remain (72 per cent), while only 30 per cent of Eurosceptics do. Interestingly though, it is not the case that Eurosceptics would prefer the UK to leave. The proportion of Eurosceptics supporting Brexit is 38 per cent overall, and close to the proportion of sceptics wishing the UK to stay (30 per cent) or who are not sure (32 per cent). While EU supporters display a clear preference, namely they wish the UK to remain a member of the EU, Eurosceptics seem to hold much more ambiguous preferences about a possible Brexit.

While EU support strongly colours people's views on a possible Brexit, age and EU knowledge seem to have little to no effects. Given that for younger respondents British EU membership has always been a fact of life, one could imagine that they would be more worried about the UK leaving compared to older respondents. Figure 4 presents the average

support for UK membership in the EU across different age cohorts. The figures show that little difference exists across generations. Among all age cohorts, a majority prefers the UK to remain a member of the EU.

Similarly, views about a possible Brexit do not vary much based on people's knowledge about the EU, see Figure 5. We capture people's EU knowledge based on their knowledge about membership of the Union (Is Switzerland an EU member?) and electoral rules (Does every country elect the same number of European parliamentarians?). Among those with high and low EU knowledge a majority wishes the UK to stay in the EU, 58 and 50 per cent respectively. The only clear difference between respondents with high and low EU knowledge is the proportion of people who are not sure about what to think of a possible Brexit. It is much higher (36 versus 22 per cent respectively) among those with low EU knowledge. This finding is not surprising.

Overall, a majority of continental Europeans prefers Britain to remain a member of the EU. Even among Eurosceptic citizens we do not find strong support for a Brexit. Why do continental Europeans want Britain to remain a part of the EU? We explore this question by examining responses to a survey item tapping into what people think will happen if the UK were to leave to the EU. A majority of continental Europeans (roughly 45 per cent) thinks that the EU will be economically weaker when the UK leaves. A quarter thinks that the EU will be less powerful in the world when the UK would leave. Interestingly, we do not find any significant differences between those in favour of the UK to stay compared to those that wish the UK to leave. Both groups express the opinion that the EU would be economically weaker in the case of a Brexit.

In a next step, we explore what continental Europeans think the consequences of a possible Brexit will be. These results are presented in Figure 6. Respondents are presented with three possible options to choose from: the EU is worse off, better off or will remain the same when the UK decides to leave. 45 per cent of continental Europeans thinks that the EU would be worse off without the UK, while only 10 per cent think that the EU would be better off. Interestingly, a large proportion of continental Europeans think that there will be little to no consequences for the EU when the British would decide to leave. 45 per cent think that the situation in the EU will remain the same.

When we break these views about the possible consequences of a Brexit for the EU down by largest member states (see Figure 7), we find that the French, Italians and Spanish think that the UK leaving would have a little to no impact

FIGURE 5 EU-27: A majority of people with high and low EU knowledge prefer the UK to stay in the EU

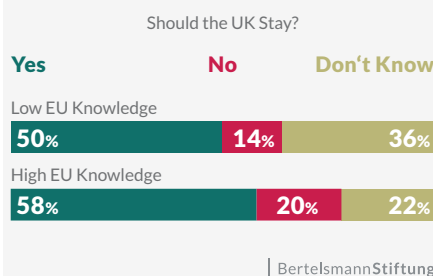


FIGURE 6 EU-27: Large proportion of continental Europeans thinks that the EU would remain the same when the UK would leave

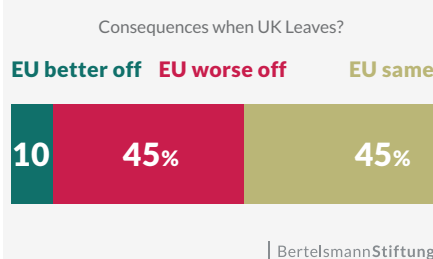


FIGURE 7 Only Polish and Germans think the EU would be worse off without the UK

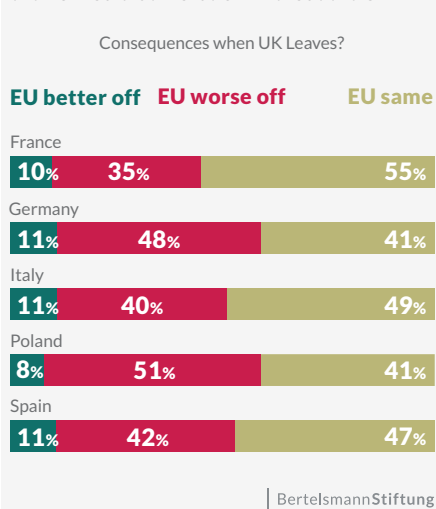


FIGURE 8 EU-27: A majority of Europeans think that a possible Brexit will have no influence for their own country

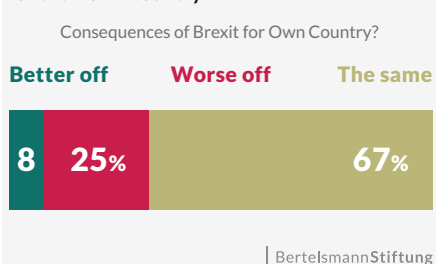
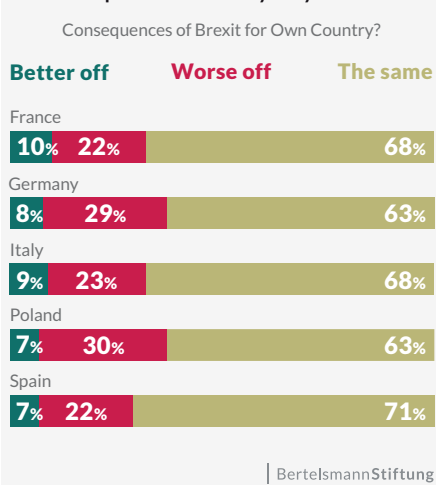


FIGURE 9 A majority in France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain thinks that the UK leaving will not impact their country very much



while the majority of German and Polish citizens think that the EU would be worse off. Even in these two countries though the proportion of those that think that there will be little to no consequences for the EU is with 41 per cent quite substantial.

A possible Brexit may of course not only affect the EU as a whole, but also have consequences for individual member states. In order to explore people's views about the impact of the UK leaving further, we asked respondents to evaluate the possible consequences of a Brexit for their own country. Figure 8 shows that on average continental Europeans believe that a possible Brexit will have little to no effect for their own country. Figure 9 shows the answers to the same question separated out for the largest member states. We find little differences across the largest member states. A majority of French, German, Italian, Polish and Spanish respondents think that very little will change in their own country when the British would decide to leave the EU.

One of the most surprising findings of our survey seems to be that while a heated debate currently exists in the UK about the possible consequences of a Brexit, a majority of continental Europeans believe that the outcome of the Brexit referendum will have little impact for them. Moreover, even though a large proportion of Europeans think that the UK leaving might affect the EU negatively, an equally large proportion think that the EU will be largely unaffected. There seems to be an apparent disconnect between the opinions about the Brexit in the UK versus the continent.

This intuition is at least partly supported when we explore the opinions of British respondents about the

possible consequences of Brexit for the EU and the UK. These results are presented in Figures 10 and 11. The majority of British respondents views that there will

be little to no consequences for the EU when the UK decides to leave. 47 per cent of British respondents think that the situation in the EU will remain the same, while 43 percent think that the EU will be worse off when the UK would leave. Figure 11 shows that the perceived consequences for the UK of a possible Brexit are viewed very differently amongst those who wish to remain versus those who wish to leave. While 55 per cent of the Brexit supporters think that their country will be better off outside the EU, 59 per cent of Brexit opponents think that the UK will be worse off. A considerable proportion of Brexit supporter and opponents, namely about a third, are uncertain about the possible consequences of a Brexit.

In a final step, we explore possible differences in opinions between British and continental European citizens further by comparing and contrasting their views of and knowledge about the EU. Figure 12 below provides an overview of the proportion of people that support their country's membership in the EU in the six largest EU member states, France, Germany, UK, Italy, Poland, and Spain. We find that a majority of the population in France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain prefer their country to remain, and that support is considerably lower in the UK. Here a majority of the population would prefer their country to leave the EU (53 per cent), while 47 per cent would prefer the UK to stay. The British findings are of course especially interesting given the upcoming Brexit referendum. Our findings here suggest that at the present time a majority of Brits would favour exit over staying in. Although a difference of 6 per cent is not huge and we need to remember that our data was collected in April 2016, these results are in line with other polling results (by the Guardian for example) that suggest that the momentum is currently on the side of the Leave campaign. Figure 13 provides an overview of people's support for further integrative steps in Europe within the six

FIGURE 10 **GB: A majority of British respondents think that there will be little to no consequences for the EU when the UK would decide to leave**

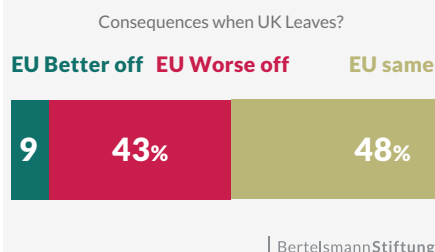


FIGURE 11 **The evaluation of the possible consequences for the UK if it were to leave the EU varies by support for or opposition towards the Brexit**

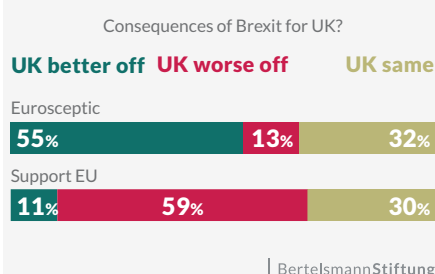


FIGURE 12 **Vote in membership referendum in six largest member states**

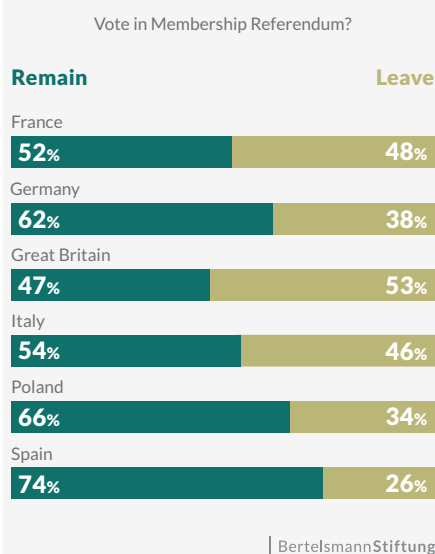
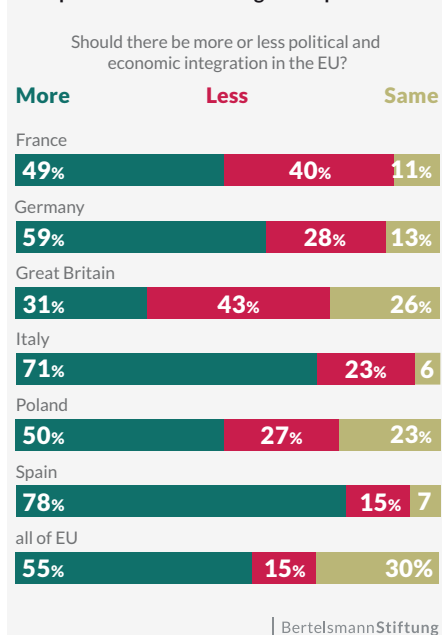


FIGURE 13 The British differ from continental Europeans in terms of integration preferences



largest member states. In our survey, we solicited people's integration preferences through the following question:

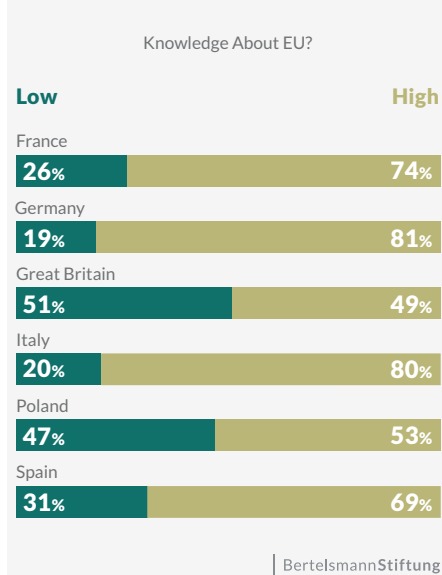
"If you had to choose, which of the following statements best describes your overall attitude towards European integration?"

- 1) We need more political and economic integration across Europe
- 2) Things should remain as they are today
- 3) We need less political and economic integration across Europe."

While in the EU as a whole we find that a majority, 55 percent of people, prefers more political and economic integration in Europe (only 30 percent prefer less and 15 percent wish the status quo to remain as it is), the situation in the UK is starkly different. Here, a higher proportion of people, namely 43 percent, favours less integration. As becomes clear from the Figure the UK clearly is an outlier in this respect. A large majority of citizens in the other five largest member states, and especially in Italy and Spain, favours further political and economic integration.

British respondents do not only differ in terms of their membership and integration preferences, they also display lower knowledge about the EU. Our EU knowledge measure is based on two questions: one that asks respondents if Switzerland was a member of the EU, and one that asks them if all member states have the same number of parliamentarians in the EP. Figure 14 plots the percentage of respondents in the six largest member states who were able to correctly answer at least one of two factual knowledge questions about the EU. Knowledge is highest in countries that have adopted the Euro, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, and lower in the non-Eurozone countries, Great Britain and Poland. Just for the sake of

FIGURE 14 Factual knowledge about the EU is lowest in the UK



comparison, in the EU as a whole a clear majority, 68 percent of people, answered at least one of these questions correctly. This is quite remarkable and suggests that knowledge about EU affairs by 2016 is relatively high in the EU as a whole.

The only country in which the proportion of people with low knowledge about the EU actually exceeds that with high knowledge, 51 versus 49 per cent respectively, is the UK. Against this backdrop, politicians and journalists still have a lot of explaining when it comes to the referendum.

All in all, our comparison of the membership and integration preferences and level of EU knowledge of British and continental European respondents suggests that Britons differ starkly from their continental European counterparts when it comes to their views about and knowledge of the EU.

Conclusion

Europeans generally do not feel very strongly about the British question. They certainly prefer the UK to remain a member of the European Union (EU), but nothing indicates that they feel very strongly about this matter. Brexit, they feel, would not be the end of Europe.

What should we make of this? Do continental Europeans have faith in the stability of the Union even if a member state decides to leave? Do they not really care about the future of the EU? Or are they possibly not aware of the possible ramifications of a Brexit as their national political elites have opted for a no interference strategy when it comes to the Brexit campaign? Our findings suggest that the effects of uncertainty do show. 25 percent of continental Europeans state that they do not know whether they would prefer the UK to stay or to leave. This proportion is in fact higher than that supporting the UK to leave and almost half of those wishing the UK to stay.

Continental Europeans just do not think that a Brexit would affect their country much. Equally, they are split about the effects of a Brexit for the EU. While many think that it will make the EU weaker, an almost equal share thinks that nothing will really change. At the same time, a clear majority of continental Europeans does wish their own country to remain a member of the EU, and thinks that more political and economic integration is needed when it comes to securing the future of Europe. The only population that holds a different opinion is the British. Not only is a small majority of British respondents in favor of leaving the EU, most interviewees in the UK feel that there should be less integration in the future. This pattern of responses cannot be found in any other European country.

The British take pride in their special role in the EU. They feel that they have done their share to prevent the EU from becoming too political, shaping it predominantly as a market place for free trade and liberal values. However, they have also earned themselves a reputation for being difficult partner, constantly opting out and demanding special rights along the way. There is nothing in our findings to suggest that the British will become less difficult even if they decide to remain a member of the EU.

What is more, even if the British were to stay in the EU they are obviously not ready to follow the Eurozone's path of deeper integration. When interviewed, a majority of British people opted for less integration. The European Union however has strictly no answer on how to deal with those member states that reject the notion of an ever closer union. So far the European Commission and the

European Council have avoided the issue. They won't be able to avoid it much longer if the British vote remain.

One additional finding also stands out. The yes-campaign is strongly focused on economic arguments. Yet, our data suggests that the economy may not be the only thing that matters to British voters. While a majority of Brexit supporters thinks that the British economy will flourish in the event of a possible Brexit, a third of Brexit supporters thinks that not much will change. 13 per cent thinks that a Brexit will even weaken the UK economy. Economic arguments do not seem to be the main drivers of the opinion of 45 per cent of British citizens that wish to see the UK leave the EU. Against this backdrop one can wonder whether the yes-campaign's heavy reliance on economic data to make the case that leaving the EU would hurt the UK, recently coined Project Fear by the no-campaign, might not end up doing more harm than good.

Continental Europeans have not been confronted with such heavy campaigning. Consequently, they remain calm in the face of a coming storm. They are not indifferent however. They do prefer the British to stay a member of the Union. They simply do not feel that a Brexit would be the end of Europe.

Method

— **T**his report presents an overview of a study conducted by Dalia Research Berlin in April 2016 on public opinion across 28 EU Member States. The sample of n=10.992 was drawn across all 28 EU Member States, taking into account current population distributions with regard to age (14–65 years), gender and region/country.

In order to obtain census representative results, the data were weighted based upon the most recent Eurostat statistics. The target weighting variables were age, gender, level of education (as defined by ISCED (2011) levels 0–2, 3–4, and 5–8), and degree of urbanization (rural and urban). An iterative algorithm was used to identify the optimal combination of weighting variables based on the sample composition within each country. An estimation of the overall design effect based on the distribution of weights was calculated at 1.43 at the global level. Calculated for a random sample of this size and considering the design-effect, the margin of error would be $\pm 1.1\%$ at a confidence level of 95 %.

List of Figures

- Figure 1 Slim majority of continental Europeans prefer the UK to remain
- Figure 2 French are least positive about the UK remaining in the EU
- Figure 3 EU support colours views about a possible Brexit
- Figure 4 Younger and older generations prefer the UK to remain
- Figure 5 A majority of people with high and low EU knowledge prefer the UK to stay in the EU
- Figure 6 Large proportion of continental Europeans thinks that the EU would remain the same when the UK would leave
- Figure 7 Only Polish and Germans think the EU would be worse off without the UK
- Figure 8 A majority of Europeans think that a possible Brexit will have little to no consequences for their own country
- Figure 9 A majority in France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain thinks that the UK leaving will not impact their country very much
- Figure 10 A majority of British respondents think that there will be little to no consequences for the EU when the UK would decide to leave
- Figure 11 The evaluation of the possible consequences for the UK if it were to leave the EU varies by support for or opposition towards the Brexit
- Figure 12 Vote in membership referendum in six largest member states
- Figure 13 The British differ from continental Europeans in terms of integration preferences
- Figure 14 Factual knowledge about the EU is lowest in the UK

Imprint

© 2016

Bertelsmann Stiftung

eupinions #2016/2

Keep calm and carry on.

What Europeans think about a possible Brexit.

ISSN: 2365-9661

Design:

Lucid. Berlin

Cover:

Hayri Er / iStockphoto.com

Bertelsmann Stiftung

Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256

33311 Gütersloh

Germany

Isabell Hoffmann

isabell.hoffmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Phone +32 2233 3892

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de