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WHY FEBRUARY'S EUROPEAN COUNCIL WON'T BE KEY TO BREXIT

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On February 2nd Donald Tusk revealed the contents of the offer meant to avoid the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. David Cameron's response was expectant, hopeful that the document would translate into the political commitment of the other EU leaders at the next European Council on February 18th and 19th. If they comply in full with the parameters of the proposal, Cameron will lead the campaign for the United Kingdom to stay in the European Union in the referendum that is likely to be held on June 23rd this year.

The publication of Tusk's offer has allowed eminently technical negotiations to take political form. The British prime minister and an ad hoc branch of the Foreign Office have been preparing the ground for agreement to be reached for some time. **Tusk's letter** covers Cameron's main demands on economic governance, competitiveness, sovereignty and immigration, and social benefits. The British diplomatic machine has been working to forge agreement on all these issues, not only with EU institutions but with a large number of the member states.

The contents of the letter represent the only possible agreement by which both parties can claim to have emerged from the negotiation with the best deal. On one side, the European institutions have introduced limits to the reform of some of the EU's central policies without giving up the fundamental pillars of the European project. On the other, David Cameron underlines the similarity between the proposal and the targets set, thanks to the very same limits.

The largest stumbling block in the negotiation was the rights of EU workers resident in the United Kingdom. Cameron wants to limit social benefits to these workers to avoid "abuses" of the services provided by the British state. EU institutions, along with many of the member states, want to avoid this turning into a relinquishment of European workers' freedom of movement and opening the door to the establishment of first class (national) and second class (other European) workers. In the days leading up to February 2nd it also seemed that the countries in the eurozone (led by France) were reluctant to change the prevailing balance between the euro-ins and euro-outs.

The February 2nd document thus represents a middle ground between Cameron's demands and the concessions made by the European institutions. A sign of this is the "emergency brake" on social benefits for European workers, which can only be activated in the case of Britain's state coffers being overburdened and requires the approval of a qualified majority of the EU Council.

A good deal of political posturing should be expected between now and February's Council. Cameron's contact with the other European leaders before the Council will be used to polish the details of a proposal that is already to a large extent agreed upon. But no lack of symbolism-heavy messages will be sent to national audiences, with Cameron showing the fruits of his negotiation and the member states (particularly those in the east) demanding trade-offs for their concessions.

In any case, the technical discussions are unlikely to have much bearing in the period between the European Council and the British referendum. Recent polls show the continued fall in the numbers of those wanting to stay in the union and the likelihood of a tight contest is growing. This has little to do with the negotiations between Cameron and the EU, and is rather the consequence of deep political currents. The issue, which the Tory leader has placed at the centre of his agenda has, until now, mattered little to Britons in general. The promise of a referendum has raised the popularity of those who wish to leave the EU no matter what Cameron manages to get from Brussels. The debates on Brexit today are merely political, not technical, and they will continue to be so until referendum day.

If February's European Council does not substantially alter the content of these pre-cooked proposals, Cameron will be the flag bearer for the "remain" camp. He will take on this role knowing that the British people's greatest concerns relate to immigration and sovereignty, so explaining the small print of the agreements reached with Brussels will not do him much good. Even economic arguments may have little weight at the time of opting to "remain" or to "leave". Cameron faces the challenge of building an eminently political campaign in which three messages could tip the balance in favour of continuity: leaving the EU would again raise the prospect of the United Kingdom's dismemberment via a possible second referendum in Scotland; internal economic and financial collapse would result from losing easy access to European markets; and the international political isolation of the country would follow.

At European level, the debate mid-way through February could also generate high political voltage. If it proves possible to protect the fundamental pillars of the European project while respecting Cameron's proposal, Europe will be better served by a focus on explaining how a UK departure from the EU would seriously harm EU interests. Beyond the economic, the EU's foreign projection and the European integration project itself would suffer major blows at a time when EU crises are piling up.

Neither should the debates on whether the United Kingdom will form part of the nucleus of the European Union predominate. Its opt-outs on the euro and Schengen already show it to be a *sui generis* member. A two-tier Europe is more reality than fiction and February's EU Council will do little more than reinforce this dynamic. But a UK exit would also bring discredit to a union that remains unprepared to institutionalise different speeds of integration. If, after the referendum, it becomes clear that the objective for Europe is no longer "ever closer union", why not put all efforts behind advancing the full integration of the eurozone and supporting Schengen? After the Brexit referendum it will be a good time for the EU's hard core to decisively face the other two crises hindering its progress: the euro and the refugees.