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EUROPE > Euro-sceptic UK could force Scotland out of EU: Salmond

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Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond delivers a speech at the College of Europe in Bruges April 28, 2014. REUTERS Photo

First Minister Alex Salmond warned on Monday that Scotland could be "dragged out of the European Union" against its will unless it votes for independence from Britain.

Speaking in Belgium, Salmond said Scotland's close ties with the bloc could be severed by the "in-out" referendum on the UK's membership of the EU which British Prime Minister [David Cameron](#) has promised for 2017.

"The real risk to Scotland's place in the EU is not the independence referendum in September. It's the in-out referendum of 2017," Salmond told an audience at the College of [Europe](#) in Bruges.

Salmond's Scottish National Party (SNP), which leads the devolved government in Edinburgh, wants Scotland to break the 300-year-old political union with Britain so as to gain its own voice on the world stage.

Salmond said Cameron's proposal to hold a referendum on EU membership is "a position which no politician in Scotland would ever have considered reasonable" and the move had "virtually no support" in the Scottish Parliament.

Salmond also played down the likelihood of an independent Scotland being kicked out of the EU, saying its ongoing membership in the bloc would offer a "no detriment" guarantee to EU commercial interests -- including fishing fleets operating in Scottish waters.

"We propose a practical, common sense approach to membership, which means that there is no detriment -- none whatsoever -- to any other member of the [European Union](#) as a result of Scotland's continuing membership," he said.

Acknowledging that an independent Scotland's continued membership of the EU would require detailed negotiations, Salmond cited legal opinions suggesting that process could be completed "within 18 months."

"So there need be no reopening of the EU budget agreed to last year to 2020," Salmond said, saying Scotland would continue to take responsibility for its share of the UK's budget and other commitments.

Arguing that Scots were more pro-European than their southern neighbours, Salmond said an independent Scotland would be "an enthusiastic, engaged and committed contributor to European progress" and that the independence movement itself reflected European values. "Ours is a peaceful, inclusive, civic -- and above all a democratic and constitutional independence movement," he said, in sharp contrast with the "profoundly anti-democratic processes we too often see elsewhere."

Salmond also took aim at outgoing European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso for having suggested Scotland's sovereignty aspirations were comparable to those of Kosovo.

"He erroneously confused our consented constitutional process with what was a contested unilateral declaration of independence," Salmond said.

The three main parties in the British parliament -- Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservatives, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats and the opposition Labour party -- are all opposed to the independence of Scotland, which accounts for eight percent of Britain's population.