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Some Europe Firms See a Win in 'Brexit'

Amid uncertainties, companies in bloc forecast some new opportunities

By Sam Schechner in Paris and Neanda Salvaterra in London

Like many business leaders in Europe, Philippe Depoux sees the potential for an economic slowdown across the continent if the U.K. votes to leave the European Union.

But Mr. Depoux, chief executive of **Gecina** SA, one of the biggest owners of office space in Paris, also sees opportunity: New tenants may come knocking in the event of a corporate exodus from London.

"What we can say for sure is that it is better to be in the Paris office real-estate business than in any other" ahead of Thursday's referendum on continued British membership in the bloc, Mr. Depoux said.

Opinion polls show the vote is too close to call. Many British owners of small businesses, as well as some hedge fund and private-equity managers, say they would be better off outside the EU's regulatory regime. But most big firms that have spoken up on the issue, inside and outside the U.K., are pushing for a vote to remain in the EU.

Executives forecast that a British exit would slow economies on both sides of the Channel, complicate hiring and force relocations of some employees or entire operations. That view hasn't stopped some cities and trade groups in France, Germany and other EU countries from readying red carpets to welcome what they say could be tens of thousands of new employees for their local economies if the U.K. votes to leave.

"Our message would be simple: Welcome to Europe, welcome to Paris," said Alain Pithon, secretary-general of Paris Europlace, a group set up to promote French finance.

"Frankfurt will have all men on deck," said Hubertus Väth, managing director of Frankfurt Main Finance, a lobbying group that promotes the German city as a financial center. He said he wants the U.K. to stay in the EU, but his organization is preparing a roadshow to woo banks in case of a "Brexit."

Some European business leaders, meanwhile, say the vote itself could be a bigger, much-needed shock to a region with too much bureaucracy and regulation in the first place.

"This Brexit vote is a really important wake-up call," said Maurice Lévy, chief executive of Paris-based advertising giant **Publicis Groupe** SA. He is hoping Britain stays in, but said the EU has botched issues ranging from the economy to what to do with refugees. "We must recognize that Europe is not working well."

Telecom Italia Chairman Giuseppe Recchi said he doesn't have an opinion on whether a U.K. exit would be good or bad for businesses. But he said this week that "maybe a shock is needed."

The case for an exit is more concrete for the mostly small British business owners who chafe at what they say is stifling regulation from Brussels.

Christopher Nieper runs a women's clothing company with four factories and more than 250 employees in Derbyshire, in the middle of England. Britain's membership in the EU enables him to export dresses, cashmere sweaters and lingerie duty-free to the rest of Europe. But he says EU regulations have raised costs. "All of this red tape makes it harder and harder for small businesses to trade," he said.

Some hedge funds and smaller financial firms in London have argued an exit could eventually lure, not repel, firms and jobs.

Jon Moulton, founder and managing partner of private-equity firm Better Capital LLP, said U.K. financial services would grow in the long term, even if a split might take a toll initially.

"The long-term approach is to have better, simpler, more properly run regulation than the rest of Europe," Mr. Moulton said. "London would do a lot better, and attract more business."

—Inti Landauro, Nick Kostov and William Wilkes contributed to this article.