

U.K.

A Weary EU Moves Toward New Brexit Delay

European leaders, while yearning to move on, consider giving U.K. until Jan. 31 to ratify divorce deal

By Laurence Norman and Bojan Pancevski

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BRUSSELS—European leaders are torn between their desire to end the Brexit saga and their conviction that they can't be the cause of the U.K. leaving the bloc without a divorce deal.

That is why—as European Union governments consider a British request to delay Brexit again after lawmakers in London rejected Prime Minister Boris Johnson's efforts to fast track the deal he negotiated with the EU—European leaders have sent conflicting messages.

European Council President Donald Tusk is asking leaders to give the U.K. until Jan. 31 after Mr. Johnson said he would pause his effort to force the deal through this month. Britain formally requested the extension on Saturday, ahead of the vote by lawmakers in London on Tuesday rejecting Mr. Johnson's timetable for ratifying the Brexit agreement.

"A no-deal Brexit will never be our decision," Mr. Tusk said on Saturday.

But French officials don't see a justification for extending Brexit more than a few days beyond the current Oct. 31 deadline to allow the British Parliament to ratify the deal. "Apart from such a perspective, an extension intended to save time or renegotiate the agreement is excluded," France's Junior Minister for European Affairs Amélie de Montchalin said Tuesday.

EU ambassadors meeting Wednesday to discuss Mr. Tusk's recommendation all agreed that an extension should be granted, but the question of its duration remained open, according to diplomats and officials involved in the discussions. A three-month extension was the favored option but a consensus wasn't reached, two of the people said.



'Waste of time, waste of energy,' European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, at left with European Council President Donald Tusk in Strasbourg, France on Tuesday, said of the dragged-out Brexit process. PHOTO: VINCENT KESSLER/REUTERS

Ambassadors hope to agree on a proposal when they meet again on Friday, the official said. Mr. Tusk seeks a written agreement from EU leaders to avoid calling them back for another Brexit summit to approve the extension.

Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, a key Brexit player, endorsed a three-month extension on Wednesday morning.

The extension plan reflects several calculations on the European side. First, while the EU long talked about being prepared for an exit without a deal, officials were clear that would carry deep economic and political costs—and possibly lasting damage to relations with the U.K.

European officials also say that if leaders are going to extend Brexit, it would be better to do it in a way that allows enough time to get the legislation through and, if necessary, allows for a general election that Mr. Johnson said he would call to win backing for his Brexit approach.

Finally, EU leaders are wary of taking sides in the domestic political debate in the U.K., which pits Mr. Johnson's sprint to Brexit against lawmakers who want to fully scrutinize the deal and potentially attach amendments.

By accepting a Jan. 31 extension supported by Parliament and formally requested by the British government, the EU would be taking the least intrusive approach to its decision, a senior EU official said Wednesday.

"We cannot be seen as interfering" in the British political debate, the official said.

Leaders who once clung to the hope that the U.K. might call off the divorce have now shifted their efforts to making sure Britain finally leaves the bloc by early next year.

"Waste of time, waste of energy," European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said on Tuesday. Mr. Juncker, whose term is due to end on Oct. 31, expressed his regret that Britain had chosen to leave, but said it had pained him to spend so much time on Brexit instead of the challenges EU citizens face.

French President Emmanuel Macron echoed those feelings after an EU summit last week, saying it is "now time to put an end to these negotiations."

Events of the past few days have done little to change that mood. If Mr. Johnson triggers an election instead of proceeding with efforts to ratify the Brexit deal, it will deepen suspicions that his priority was always political and that securing a deal came second, diplomats said.

There are still EU governments—mostly from the Baltics and elsewhere in the east—that dream of Britain staying in the bloc. Mr. Tusk, a former Polish prime minister, said last week that if the U.K. decides to return to the EU one day "our door will always be open."

In Berlin, however, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said last week she thought it would take at least a generation before Britain could consider re-entering the bloc.

The prospect of another indecisive referendum leading to a recalcitrant U.K. remaining inside the EU doesn't appeal to many of the EU's biggest West European powers, such as France.

If Britain remains a member beyond February, a senior EU official involved in the Brexit talks said, it would poison the debate on key pressing issues such as the EU's nearly \$200 billion seven-

year budget. “We can’t be seen to be booting them out, but by March they must be out,” the official said.

—*Valentina Pop contributed to this article.*

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