

EUROPE

Johnson Prepares to Put Brexit Deal to Vote After Foiled First Try

The British prime minister's plan to get the deal agreed by lawmakers failed after they forced him to seek a Brexit extension first

By Jason Douglas in London and Laurence Norman in Brussels

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U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson is set to bring his Brexit deal back to Parliament this week for a critical vote after lawmakers forced him to ask the European Union for another delay to Britain's withdrawal.

Mr. Johnson will try as soon as Monday to secure the votes he needs to win approval, potentially paving the way for the U.K. to leave the EU after more than three years of negotiation and fierce debate. Downing Street would hope to use a win to attempt to race through the final stages of legislative scrutiny in time for an Oct. 31 deadline and make any extension unnecessary.

Mr. Johnson's minority government is within a handful of votes of winning passage for his deal. But it isn't yet clear that he can command enough support from rebel and opposition lawmakers to ratify it, a goal that eluded his predecessor, Theresa May, on three occasions, leading her to step down.



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Another question is whether his Brexit is blue print

t can pass through lawmakers' hands without alteration from pro- and anti-Brexit factions eager to make their mark on the terms of the U.K.'s withdrawal in ways that the government would oppose—for example by requiring the deal be confirmed by a second referendum. Arcane parliamentary procedures may also thwart Mr. Johnson's efforts to secure a parliamentary vote on the deal on Monday.

Mr. Johnson won European leaders' approval for a revised Brexit deal at a summit on Thursday, a diplomatic success that defied the expectations of his political opponents.

The prime minister presented the deal to lawmakers in a rare Saturday sitting of Parliament. Urging them to vote for the package, he said his new deal provided “a real Brexit” that would be “the greatest single restoration of national sovereignty in parliamentary history.”

But instead of voting on the deal, lawmakers approved a measure that requires a decisive vote to be held only once all the accompanying legislation has been properly scrutinized, a process that can take days, weeks or even months.

The government is still hopeful it can win passage. Some lawmakers voted to force the extension only to avoid the economic disruption they fear would ensue from the U.K. leaving the EU without a deal and say they will support it once that risk is extinguished.

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The measure's passage triggered a law that required Mr. Johnson to request a three-month extension to Britain's EU membership, to Jan. 31, to avoid the risk the country tumbles out of the bloc at the end of October without a legal framework to smooth its withdrawal.

Mr. Johnson, who had said he would rather “die in a ditch” than request an extension, complied. But in a gesture aimed at showing a domestic audience that he was

acting unwillingly, he didn't sign the letter requesting the delay. In a separate letter to European Council President Donald Tusk, he urged EU leaders to turn down his own request.

“A further extension would damage the interests of the U.K. and our EU partners,” Mr. Johnson wrote. Downing Street's calculation is that lawmakers are more likely to vote for the withdrawal package if the risk of leaving without a deal remains open.

“We are going to leave on Oct. 31. We have the means and the ability to do so,” Michael Gove, a senior minister in Mr. Johnson’s administration, said Sunday in an interview with Sky News.

The extension request leaves EU leaders with three knotty decisions: whether to approve the extension; when to make that call; and how long an extension should last.

EU governments are very eager to be finished with Brexit as soon as possible so the bloc can move on to other pressing challenges. They will want to keep the pressure on U.K. lawmakers to support the agreement they hammered out with Mr. Johnson, but they also want to avoid an accidental no-deal outcome if they don’t extend the deadline and the U.K. exits Oct. 31 without a deal.

On Saturday afternoon, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke with Mr. Johnson and expressed “the need for a quick clarification of the British position” on the agreement, an aide said. Mr. Macron said that “a delay would not be in the interest of either side.” Mr. Johnson also spoke with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Mr. Tusk.

Mr. Tusk said on Twitter on Saturday evening that he would take a few days to consult with other EU leaders to decide on an extension request. A senior EU official said Sunday it was “very unlikely” a decision would be made before U.K. lawmakers vote—one way to keep the pressure on British lawmakers.

Mr. Tusk might decide to summon leaders to another summit to approve the request, potentially a few days before Oct. 31, as another way to encourage Parliament to back the deal and avoid the threat of a no-deal Brexit.

Mr. Johnson said in his letter to Mr. Tusk that he would attend such a summit to update counterparts on Britain’s progress with the ratification process.

If time looks too short to approve the deal before month’s end, leaders are widely expected to grant an extension, although any decision to do so must be unanimous.

They must then decide whether to back a short, technical extension to allow both sides enough time to ratify the agreement or a longer one that could allow Britain to hold a general election or a second referendum on the deal, something U.K. lawmakers could still demand.

One option for EU leaders is to repeat the formula they found to grant the second Brexit extension in April: Allow for a longer delay but open the way for Britain to leave earlier if the ratification process is completed. The deal also needs approval of the European Parliament, where lawmakers might vote on it Thursday, a senior EU parliamentary official said.

Mr. Johnson is expected to bring back his withdrawal deal for another vote Monday or Tuesday. The prime minister needs to persuade just nine lawmakers who voted against him on Saturday

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over the extension—and half-a-dozen of them have said they would back the new deal now that the prospect of an accidental no-deal exit is less likely.

The deal was backed by a group of 28 pro-Brexit lawmakers. A number of ex-Conservatives who quit or were expelled from the party for defying Mr. Johnson in past votes, also rowed in behind the deal.

“We seem to have the numbers in the House of Commons,” Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corp. on Sunday. Maddy Thimont Jack, senior researcher at the Institute for Government, said the government has “quite a good chance” of passing the deal.

If lawmakers approve the deal, it would take further legislative scrutiny to take effect in law. That opens the possibility that important changes could still be made, including whether to put the whole package to a public vote in a new referendum, a key goal of many pro-EU legislators.

If Parliament doesn’t ratify the agreement, the Brexit process would again be plunged into uncertainty, with an election likely needed to resolve the stalemate.

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