

EUROPE

Five Things About the Brexit Deal

Questions and uncertainties persist after EU leaders approved an exit agreement with Britain on Thursday

By Laurence Norman

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The U.K. government and the EU sealed a revamped Brexit deal on Thursday, opening the way for a possible British exit from the bloc on Oct. 31.

What's needed to complete Brexit this month?

EU leaders endorsed the deal Thursday. It must be approved by the U.K. and European Parliaments. The EU has said it would have the text translated into all 24 EU languages by Monday. EU lawmakers say they want to help deliver a deal. The big challenge is winning U.K. lawmakers' backing in a vote on Saturday. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has a minority government and his party's allies from Northern Ireland have said they can't support the deal.

What happens if U.K. lawmakers say no?

If Mr. Johnson loses Saturday's vote, he is obliged by law to seek a Brexit delay until Jan. 31. Providing he complies, EU leaders would need to decide whether to grant it and for how long. European officials say it is unlikely they would refuse. Judging how much more time to give will be a delicate call. The EU wants Brexit off its plate but leaders know that with Mr. Johnson seeking an election and the opposition pushing a second Brexit referendum, a longer extension might be required.

How is the deal similar to Theresa May's failed agreement?

The bulk of the deal is the same as the November 2018 agreement negotiated by Mr. Johnson's predecessor. The U.K. will pay its divorce bill and has agreed to lock in the rights of EU citizens residing there. Mr. Johnson reluctantly signed up to a side declaration, which isn't legally binding, that says the U.K. will uphold "robust" social, environmental, tax and labor standards. In exchange, the EU will aim for a zero-tariff, zero-quotas future trade deal.

What are the main differences?

Mrs. May's agreement would likely have left the whole of the U.K. indefinitely in the EU customs union as a way of maintaining close economic ties and avoiding a physical border in Ireland. The new deal keeps only Northern Ireland aligned with EU regulation but obliges regulatory and customs checks when goods travel from Britain to Northern Ireland to avoid border controls between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The whole of the U.K. will be able to negotiate trade deals.

What concessions did the EU give?

In addition to agreeing to arrangements that allow all of the U.K. to benefit from future British trade deals, the EU agreed that Northern Ireland policy makers should be asked to consent to the arrangements after four years. The EU accepted that the U.K. would create and police the customs system and said the U.K. would have authority over the value-added-tax regime operating in Northern Ireland, although the province must accept many of the EU's VAT-regime rules. The EU said some products could be exempt from customs controls if they are clearly destined only for Northern Ireland and won't enter the EU's single market.