



European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, left, European Council President Donald Tusk | John Thys/AFP via Getty Images

It's your move, EU tells UK after fresh Brexit defeat

Second rejection of deal confirms EU leaders' view on lack of consensus in Britain.

By **DAVID M. HERSZENHORN** | 3/12/19, 8:56 PM CET | Updated 3/12/19, 10:36 PM CET

EU leaders and senior officials were dismayed but hardly surprised as the U.K. parliament rejected the Brexit deal for a second time.

With U.K. politics in crisis and the course of Brexit highly uncertain, they quickly expressed a willingness to consider an extension to the Article 50 negotiating period that would prevent Britain from crashing out of the bloc without a deal.

The refusal of MPs in Westminster to endorse the deal, despite a flurry of last-minute legal reassurances about the "backstop" provision on the Northern Ireland border, only confirmed the conviction in Brussels that the U.K. is so divided it cannot reach an agreement.

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And officials expressed a sense of powerlessness over U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May's failure to secure a majority — despite their own steadfast refusal to renegotiate the agreement or put a time limit on the backstop provision that might have helped her to win round more MPs.

"We regret the outcome of tonight's vote and are disappointed that the U.K. government has been unable to ensure a majority for the Withdrawal Agreement agreed by both parties in November," spokesmen for European Council President Donald Tusk and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said.

"On the EU side we have done all that is possible to reach an agreement," the statement said. "Given the additional assurances provided by the EU in December, January and yesterday, it is difficult to see what more we can do. If there is a solution to the current impasse it can only be found in London."

Officials at the European Council and the European Commission said the EU is prepared to consider an extension of the March 29 deadline for the U.K.'s departure. But EU27 leaders, who will meet at a summit in Brussels next week, have yet to hold a detailed discussion about what terms they might consider.

Among the possibilities is a short-term extension that might simply give more time to prepare for a no-deal exit. Another option would be a longer-term extension that would mean Britain having to participate in the European Parliament election in May and delay its departure for a year or more.



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EU officials, however, showed no indication that they are willing to make any new concessions. They see no chance of turning a sufficient number of votes in Britain without surrendering on the most fundamental EU red lines, including the preservation of the bloc's single market and its four fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of movement.

"The EU for its part continues to stand by the Withdrawal Agreement, including the backstop, which serves to prevent a hard border in Ireland and preserve the integrity of the single market unless and until alternative arrangements can be found," the statement said. "With only 17 days left to 29 March, today's vote has significantly increased the likelihood of a 'no-deal' Brexit. We will continue our no-deal preparations and ensure that we will be ready if such a scenario arises."

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It continued, "Should there be a U.K. reasoned request for an extension, the EU27 will consider it and decide by unanimity. The EU27 will expect a credible justification for a possible extension and its duration. The smooth functioning of the EU institutions will need to be ensured."

EU diplomats were scheduled to meet on Wednesday morning to discuss next steps.

"In my view, the EU has done more than its part," one senior EU diplomat said. "The 27 have endorsed the agreed result of the negotiations, they have also endorsed the additional assurances, clarifications etc. when the U.K. sought them. It is now up to the U.K. to decide: Deal or no deal?"

The diplomat added, "I don't think the EU27 should do anything anymore. It should simply wait for U.K. to decide by March 29. If the U.K. asks for an extension, it should specify what the purpose would be. If it would be only for continuation of the present ping-pong, I don't think we should agree."

Barnier warns on transition

The EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, echoed the disappointment and sense of exasperation — and he said the disaster planning in Brussels for a no-deal scenario was now even more crucial.

"On EU side we've done all that's possible to reach an agreement," Barnier tweeted. "It's difficult to see what more we can do. If there's a solution to the current impasse it can only be found in London. Today's vote has significantly increased the likelihood of no-deal Brexit."

Earlier, Barnier even chimed in during the House of Commons debate, posting on Twitter to push back against suggestions among some British MPs that Britain might still be granted a transition period that would forestall the harshest economic consequences of a no-deal departure.

In his tweet, Barnier noted that the only way for the U.K. to secure the proposed 21-month transition period would be to approve the treaty that was agreed with May's negotiating team in November.

Leaders across the Continent quickly issued reactions hewing closely to the script agreed upon in Brussels. It was another example of the unity — unheard of in Brussels on virtually any other issue — that the EU has managed to maintain on Brexit.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte was among the national leaders to reiterate that "a solution must come from London." Rutte also restated the Netherlands' commitment to

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the backstop provision, and declared that the Dutch government would step up its own planning for a no-deal, including efforts to protect citizens.

He also voiced a willingness to consider a reasonable U.K. request for an extension of the departure deadline.

“Should the U.K. hand in a reasoned request for an extension, I expect a credible and convincing justification,” Rutte tweeted. “The #EU27 will consider the request and decide by unanimity. The smooth functioning of the EU institutions needs to be ensured.”

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez also weighed in, stressing that the EU has done its very best.

“We regret the decision of the British Parliament despite the effort of the EU to achieve the best agreement,” Sánchez tweeted.

Delay discussions

A second EU diplomat said that Brussels has to do everything in its power to prevent the U.K. from crashing out.

“The main priority of EU27 is to avoid a no-deal Brexit,” the diplomat said. If an extension is the only way to avoid that scenario on [March 29] then leaders will likely give their consent. However, there must be a request for an extension from U.K. in the first place.”

The second diplomat, like many EU officials, said that there is a need to avoid any interference with the formation of the new European Parliament, meaning that an extension could be limited until July 1 at the latest, shortly before a new Parliament is seated. Other officials, including Juncker, have suggested that if the U.K. is still a member of the EU in May then Britain will have to take part in the European Parliament election.

A senior official from one EU government said it would be difficult for Brussels to refuse an extension request — but for how long is unclear.

“If U.K. ask, we are going to give it,” the official said. “I cannot tell duration.”

The decision to grant an extension must be made unanimously by the 27 remaining countries, and it is unclear that agreeing to terms of an extension with the U.K. will be any easier than the negotiating process up until now.

Jacopo Barigazzi, Lili Bayer and Maïa de la Baume contributed reporting

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This article has been updated.

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