
IRISH BORDER MESS STILL BLOCKING BREXIT DEAL, EU SAYS

- 02.05.2018

EU Observer (1 May 2018)

EU Brexit chief negotiator Michel Barnier has warned of a risk that no withdrawal agreement will be reached with the UK by October if there is no solution on the Irish border issue.

"Until we reach this operational solution for Northern Ireland, a backstop, and we are ready to work on any proposal with the UK, there is a risk [of a no deal]," Barnier said at a press conference with Irish prime minister Leo Varadkar and deputy PM and foreign minister Simon Conveney in Dundalk, Ireland, on Monday (30 April).

Irish officials insist that "significant progress" on the border issue should be achieved by the June meeting of EU leaders for the UK to secure a deal.

Barnier later confirmed the deadline. "We need substantive progress on the backstop before the June European Council," he said.

Barnier also said he saw the June summit as a stepping stone towards the October summit, which is a deadline to finalise the whole withdrawal agreement.

"We need to agree rapidly by June on several points * including some of alignments on customs and regulations and safety controls," he said.

Varadkar said that, for Dublin, June was a make-or-break date.

"We agreed that we need significant progress before the end of the June to have an agreement in October," the taoiseach said.

EU and Irish and officials reminded the UK that it had already agreed to the so-called backstop solution that would see Northern Ireland fully aligned with EU rules to an extent that would ensure the functioning of cooperation between the north and south of the island.

This underpins the Good Friday agreement which brought peace to the island of Ireland in 1998 after decades of conflict.

Once the UK leaves the EU, the border between Northern Ireland and the republic of Ireland will become an EU external border. The UK said it also wants to leave the EU's customs union and single market.

In December, the UK agreed, in principle, to possible options for resolving the Irish border conundrum, either within the context of a wider EU-UK future relationship deal, or under a British bespoke solution to avoid a hard border and the backstop.

This was worked out in the draft withdrawal agreement in February, which the UK again signed up to in March.

The backstop option, however, has become politically toxic in the UK, with some arguing in Britain that it constitutes an EU "land grab".

June summit

"We insist on seeing significant progress by the June European Council," Irish deputy PM and foreign minister Simon Coveney told reporters before meeting with Barnier.

Coveney has argued that even though the withdrawal agreement was expected to be fully agreed by October, the toughest issue, avoiding a hard border in Ireland, should not be left to the last minute.

"There will be no withdrawal agreement if there is no Irish backstop in it, that's what has been agreed," Coveney said. "If we don't agree in June, it'll be very difficult to move on," he added.

He insisted this was the EU's position and not solely Ireland's. "We are not out on a limb here," he said.

The UK government is pondering whether to agree to some level of customs union with the EU to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland.

But an EU compromise could break British prime minister Theresa May, after hardline Brexiteers designated independent trade policy as a flagship reason for leaving the EU.

UK Brexit negotiator David Davis hopes to put off the issue and solve it within a wider EU-UK free trade deal, which is not acceptable to either the EU, nor Ireland, since the UK had bound itself to resolve the issue within the withdrawal agreement.

Customs union not enough

Irish and EU officials also said that for the UK to opt back into the bloc's customs union after Brexit would not be not enough to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland.

That would require full regulatory alignment in some areas between north and south Ireland to keep the border open, in a region where border checkpoints symbolised recent sectarian warfare.

It would also require legal monitoring and conflict resolution, creating a need for the European Court of Justice (ECJ) to play a role, an idea that London has rejected.

"Finding a solution that is politically sellable in the UK is difficult, but it is because of their negotiating position," Coveney said, pushing back on the notion that the UK's red lines have to be

accommodated by either the EU or Ireland.

"The UK has set out red lines and expects everyone to play along. What about our red lines? What about the EU's red lines?," he said.

"I know the politics of this is really difficult in the UK, but the politics of this is really difficult in Ireland as well," he added.

The stakes were high for Ireland, Coveney noted.

Ireland has a year in trade with the UK, accounting for 200,000 jobs, excluding the agricultural sector, he said.

"We would like to see the UK in a shared customs area with the EU," the Irish deputy PM said.

For Ireland, to avoid a border on the Irish Sea between the UK and Ireland was also important, but maintaining peace on the island was a bigger priority, he said.

"This is not primarily about trade, it is about trying to maintain the normalisation that has been hard fought after decades of violence," Coveney told reporters.

No deal?

The Irish government is now betting on London blinking first.

Dublin hopes May's cabinet will not allow Britain to crash out of the EU without a withdrawal agreement or a transition period over the Irish border issue.

Meanwhile, Irish officials acknowledge that a no-deal scenario would hurt Ireland more than any other EU state.

"We need to hold our nerve on this," Coveney said.

Kaynak/Source: