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## HIGH NOON FOR BRITISH PM ON BREXIT

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British MPs are voting on a Brexit bill that could destabilise the government, as the clock ticks to the UK exit date next March.

The bill, as amended by the House of Lords, would grant parliament the power to reject a final Brexit deal it did not like in what it called a "meaningful vote", effectively keeping the UK in the EU.

May will face EU leaders at Brussels summit later this month (Photo: European Commission)

The 14 other amendments would give MPs oversight powers on future changes to EU law as it applied in Britain, remove the precise date of Brexit from the text, and enshrine the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights in British law, among other ideas on how to tie prime minister Theresa May's hands in the process.

The bill has exposed her slender grip on power.

She needs the support of almost all her own Conservative Party MPs, as well as those from the fringe Northern Irish party, the DUP, to overturn the Lords.

At least six of her MPs might rebel, however, the BBC reported on the eve of the vote, to be held on Tuesday (11 June) and Wednesday.

A defeat could mean the vote turns into one of no confidence in her ability to deliver on Brexit, prompting anti-EU hawks in her party, such as foreign minister Boris Johnson or MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, to mount a leadership challenge.

The ensuing mess would make it less likely for British and EU negotiators to conclude a deal in time for March, when the UK would walk off a 'cliff edge' into legal uncertainty on vital issues such as the Irish border, trade, and commercial aviation.

"I'm trying to negotiate the best deal for Britain," May said on the eve of the House of Commons vote.

"I'm confident I can get a deal that allows us to strike our own trade deals while having a border with the EU which is as frictionless as possible, but if the Lords amendments are allowed to stand, that negotiating position will be undermined," she said.

It was "simply not right" that parliament could overturn the Brexit referendum with a vote, David

Davis, her Brexit minister said.

The House of Lords has so far defeated May 15 times in earlier votes.

The opposition Labour party is backing 14 out of the 15 amendments, though not one saying that the UK might join Norway as a member of the European Economic Area - a club of countries with access to the single market, in return for applying EU laws.

But if the embattled PM scrapes through on this one, it would be less likely on substance, and more likely due to Tory MPs trying to avoid a leadership battle at such a late stage in the game.

Davis noted what was at stake at a meeting with EU negotiator Michel Barnier in Brussels on Monday, at which he said the UK should get access to EU extradition arrangements, the so-called European Arrest Warrant, no matter what happens.

"If we were frozen out \*∇ British law enforcement services "may no longer be able to protect the public when dangerous individuals move between the United Kingdom and the European Union," Davis said earlier.

MPs will also vote on Wednesday on whether the UK could stay in a "customs union" or what May calls a "customs partnership" with the EU.

The former is the only way to avoid an Irish border crisis, its advocates say, but it would also represent May's EU capitulation to Tory hawks, putting her in a lose-lose position once again.

## **Russian whiff**

Meanwhile, the votes in the Commons will take place amid a growing smell of Russian meddling in Brexit from the chambers of the digital, culture, media, and sport committee down the hall.

The committee, which is looking into 'fake news', will hold a hearing with one of the British businessmen, Arron Banks, who bankrolled the Brexit campaign on Tuesday.

The Q&A comes amid revelations by The Guardian, a British daily, that he met several times with Russian officials in the run-up to the referendum.

Russia was said by US intelligence to have interfered in the American election in 2016 that put Donald Trump in the White House.

But the Banks revelations were the latest sign that its anti-democracy machine had already got to work earlier in Europe, as it also did later, in the French and German elections last year.

"[Russian leader] Vladimir Putin says he wants a united and prosperous Europe because it is Russia's biggest trade and economic partner, yet all one needs to do is look at the actions of the Russian state, not Putin's pronouncements," Dan Coats, the US director of national intelligence, said at a think-tank event in France on Monday.

"Invading Ukraine, seizing Crimea, attacking individuals in the UK with nerve agent, conducting cyber-attacks against multiple EU countries, and undermining the energy resources of eastern European countries do not strike me as unifying actions," Coats said.

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