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## **BREXIT AND CHINA TOP EU AFFAIRS THIS WEEK**

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Brexit and China will dominate EU affairs this week, as leaders meet for emergency talks two days before the UK is due to crash out of the EU with no deal in place.

The Brexit summit on Thursday (10 April) will ponder whether to accept Britain's request to delay its EU departure from 12 April to 30 June.

The UK was already meant to have left on 29 March, but stayed in because MPs could not agree what kind of withdrawal deal they wanted with Europe. They had voted down the deal agreed between British prime minister Theresa May and the EU three times, despite the ticking clock.

For their part, Donald Tusk, the EU Council president, and Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Commission president, have suggested either flexible or more long-term Brexit delays.

If the EU-27 agree to another extension that might mean Britain has to contest the European Parliament (EP) elections in May.

That would cause a mess, with British MEPs later pulling out once Brexit takes place and upsetting the composition of the EP's next legislature.

But a no-deal crash-out would cause an even bigger crisis, upsetting trade and transport links and leaving EU and UK residents in doubt on their rights.

Tusk and Juncker will also meet Chinese prime minister Li Keqiang in Brussels one day earlier to talk trade.

The EU is pushing for greater market access for European firms in China and fewer Chinese subsidies for its industrial champions.

It is also keen to talk about the security aspects of their          trade relationship, as China buys up strategic assets in the EU, including ports, railways, and mobile phone networks.

Leading human rights groups have urged them to also mention China's mass imprisonment of Uighur Muslims, its oppression of Tibet, and the "enforced disappearance" of activists.

"At previous EU-China summits, the EU's top leadership has given little more than token lip service to urgent human rights concerns," the groups, including Human Rights With and Amnesty International, said.

Meanwhile, state-building in Afghanistan, the political crisis in Venezuela, and EU relations with former Soviet states, such as Ukraine, will be on the agenda when foreign ministers start the week with a meeting in Luxembourg on Monday.

Libya, where a Russian-backed warlord, Khalifa Haftar, threatens to sweep the EU and UN-backed government in Tripoli off the map, will also feature in the talks.

The state of rule of law in Hungary and Poland, which risk EU sanctions for their abuses, will occupy EU affairs ministers meeting in Brussels on Tuesday.

The EU's next big budget, covering 2021 to 2027 will also come under discussion amid suggestions that misbehavers such as Budapest and Warsaw ought to be punished via cuts to EU funds for their poor regions.

The EP will hold a handful of committee meetings, on issues ranging from how to fill the EU budget gap in 2019 after the UK leaves (Thursday) and how Denmark can cooperate in an EU judicial club despite its opt-out on EU policy in that area (Monday).

But many eyes will also turn to Milan, Italy, where Italian far-right leader Matteo Salvini will, on Monday, hold a congress with like-minded politicians from 20-or-so other EU states in his bid to form an anti-EU league in the EP after the May vote.

Eyes will also turn to Rwanda on Monday, where Juncker will join prime minister Paul Kagame to honour the victims, including 10 Belgian peacekeepers, of the 1994 genocide there.

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