
BREXIT: DONALD TUSK RECEIVES 'PROMISING SIGNALS' FROM IRISH PM

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European Council President Donald Tusk has said he received "promising signals" from Irish PM Leo Varadkar that a Brexit deal is still possible.

His comments came as Brexit Secretary Steve Barclay and EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier resumed talks in Brussels, after a meeting between Mr Varadkar and Boris Johnson on Thursday.

Both sides called the Johnson-Varadkar discussion "very positive".

The UK is due to leave the EU at 23:00 GMT on 31 October.

Mr Barclay and Michel Barnier's "technical" talks came ahead of a crunch EU summit on 17 and 18 October, which is seen as the last chance for the UK and the EU to agree a deal ahead of the Brexit deadline.

BBC Brussels correspondent Adam Fleming said he suspected the best outcome for the UK that could emerge from the Barclay-Barnier meeting would be the EU agreeing to restart fuller and "more intense" negotiations.

Earlier this week, several senior EU figures played down the chances of Brexit happening with a deal agreed to by both sides.

But on Thursday, Mr Johnson and Mr Varadkar held a one-to-one discussion - described by both as "very positive and very promising" - at Thornton Manor, Merseyside.

Afterwards, Mr Varadkar told reporters the talks were at a "very sensitive stage" but he was now "convinced" the UK wanted a deal, adding: "I do see a pathway towards an agreement in the coming weeks."

But he refused to be drawn on what "concessions" had been made by either side during his meeting with Mr Johnson, while Downing Street has not commented on Irish press reports suggesting "significant movement" on the UK prime minister's part.

Speaking on a visit to Cyprus, Mr Tusk said the UK had not "come forward with a workable, realistic proposal", but added he had received "positive signals" from Mr Varadkar that a deal was still possible.

"Of course there is no guarantee of success and time is practically up but even the slightest chance must be used," he added. "A no-deal Brexit will never be the choice of the EU."

The EU will make major concessions, says Stuart Wheeler

However, there were, he said, still issues over "consent and democracy" and ensuring there is no customs border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Downing Street also said the talks had concentrated on "the challenges of customs and consent".

"No one's cracking open the champagne * don't even pour a pint of warm Guinness," joked one of the few people familiar with what actually happened on Thursday after talks between Boris Johnson and Leo Varadkar.

Nothing that happened in the privacy of a country house wedding venue on the Wirral means there will be a deal with the EU in the next seven days.

Nothing has made the obstacles in the way of reaching an agreement magically disappear.

But something has changed.

After days of various EU players publicly scorning the UK's proposals, explaining the objections and lamenting the weaknesses, there is a tangible willingness, on the bloc's side at least, to see seriously if they can work.

We've discussed here so many times why Ireland's attitude matters so much, so the very public positivity from Mr Varadkar - his "maybe", instead of "no" to Mr Johnson's proposals - is extremely important.

The issue of Northern Ireland's consent - and how it is achieved - for post-Brexit arrangements has emerged as a key factor in negotiations.

But Northern Ireland Secretary Julian Smith said there were "a range of options" for finding consent for the proposals.

He also denied any "one community" would have a veto over Brexit plans, following concern from some NI parties that the PM's proposals could give the Democratic Unionist Party exactly that.

What are the PM's border plans?

Under Mr Johnson's proposals, which he calls a "broad landing zone" for a new deal with the EU:

- Northern Ireland would leave the EU's customs union alongside the rest of the UK, at the start of 2021
- But Northern Ireland would continue to apply EU legislation relating to agricultural and other products, if the Northern Ireland Assembly approves
- This arrangement could, in theory, continue indefinitely, but the consent of Northern Ireland's politicians would have to be sought every four years
- Customs checks on goods traded between the UK and EU would be "decentralised", with paperwork submitted electronically and only a "very small number" of physical checks

- These checks should take place away from the border itself, at business premises or at "other points in the supply chain"

With three weeks to go until the Brexit deadline, the prime minister continues to insist the UK will leave the EU with or without a deal at the end of the month.

That is despite the so-called Benn Act - passed by MPs last month - demanding he request a delay to the Article 50 deadline from the EU until January 2020 if a deal has not been agreed before 19 October.

Should any new deal be reached between the EU and UK, it will still have to be approved by MPs in Parliament.

Timeline: What's happening ahead of Brexit deadline?

Monday 14 October - The Commons is due to return, and the government will use the Queen's Speech to set out its legislative agenda. The speech will then be debated by MPs throughout the week.

Thursday 17 October - Crucial two-day summit of EU leaders begins in Brussels. This is the last such meeting currently scheduled before the Brexit deadline.

Saturday 19 October - Special sitting of Parliament and the date by which the PM must ask the EU for another delay to Brexit under the Benn Act, if no Brexit deal has been approved by Parliament and they have not agreed to the UK leaving with no-deal.

Thursday 31 October - Date by which the UK is due to leave the EU, with or without a withdrawal agreement.

Kaynak/Source: