
UK ELECTION: EU LEADERS FOCUS ON BREXIT AFTER JOHNSON WIN

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EU officials are welcoming the "clarity" provided by Boris Johnson's decisive victory in Britain's election. The bloc's leaders now have the tough task of negotiating a trade deal with the UK after Brexit.

European Union leaders expressed relief on Friday after Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservatives secured a sizeable majority in Britain's election, paving the way for an orderly Brexit next month.

"It is a very clear result," Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven told reporters in Brussels, where EU leaders are attending a two-day summit.

"It means that we will move forward with our separation now. We now have 11 months to hash out a deal (on the future trade agreement). It's a very short time," he said.

Austria's Sebastian Kurz praised Johnson's "impressive electoral victory" and said that "withdrawal agreement will now hopefully soon be ratified."

Congratulations for your impressive electoral victory @BorisJohnson! The withdrawal agreement will now hopefully soon be ratified and we can focus on the future relationship between the #EU and the #UK which should be as close as possible.

'We need clarity'

Johnson's projected majority means he should be able to get parliament's backing for the withdrawal agreement he struck with the EU in October, allowing Britain to leave the bloc as planned at the end of January.

EU Council President Charles Michel, who is hosting Friday's summit in Brussels, said: "We are ready for the next steps and we will see if it's possible for the British parliament to accept the Withdrawal Agreement and take a decision."

France's European affairs minister, Amelie de Montchalin, told reporters a clear majority had long been missing from UK politics. "We've been saying for several months: 'We need clarity'," she said.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said officials meeting in Brussels on Friday would now work swiftly to draft a mandate for post-Brexit trade talks.

Negotiating trade deal 'tall order'

After January 31, Britain enters a transition period until the end of 2020, during which time London and the EU have to reach an agreement on what their future trade relationship will look like.

The EU is hoping to start trade talks, led by EU negotiator Michel Barnier, by March, leaving just 10 months to agree on a deal and get it ratified by the British Parliament and EU countries.

Some EU officials say that's not nearly long enough, given that trade agreements can often take years to negotiate.

"(It is) a tall order to move on the future relationship in such a short time," one EU official said.

London can request an extension, but it would need to do that no later than June.

According to a draft Brexit text cited by Agence France-Presse and due to be adopted at the summit on Friday, EU leaders will call for "as close as possible a future relationship with the UK" while warning that "the future relationship will have to be based on a balance of rights and obligations and ensure a level playing field" in terms of business and trade rules.

nm/rt (AFP, Reuters)

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