

Yet another Brexit deadline looms; trade talks in rut

October 12 2020, by Raf Casert



Chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier makes a phone call as he leaves the chancellery following a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin, Germany, Monday, Oct. 5, 2020. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

Almost by tradition, another Brexit deadline is looming. Just as much by

tradition, talks are expected to continue afterward.

British negotiators traveled to European Union headquarters on Monday to start what has long been billed as another do-or-die session between both sides. The divorce was settled at the end of January when the U.K. left the spurned bloc. Now, the end of a transition period is drawing close and both sides have to decide what kind of trade [deal](#), if any, they want.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has long billed the two-day EU summit that starts Thursday as an ultimate deadline. The 27-nation EU is willing to go on until early November to craft a deal, however basic, that could still save hundreds of thousands of jobs and prevent an even worse economic crisis than the coronavirus pandemic has already wrought.

On Monday, Johnson's spokesman said the U.K. still viewed this week's talks as crucial.

"Time is in short supply," said James Slack. "We will work as hard as we can to see if we can get an agreement by Oct. 15. The EU themselves indicated to the U.K. negotiating team in July that mid-October was the last possible date for a deal."

The urgency was highlighted by weekend phone calls between Johnson and French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Charles Michel, the Council president, were calling other EU leaders to make sure the bloc remained united.

In Paris, pressure was increased by yet another warning for businesses to prepare for a drastic rupture, possibly without a deal.

After months of talks, Britain and the EU appear to remain deadlocked

on the key issues of fishing and rules to ensure fair economic competition. If there is any hope for a deal, neither side is letting on.



UK Chief Brexit negotiator David Frost leaves 10 Downing Street, in London, Wednesday, Oct. 7, 2020. (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)

"Intensive discussions continue in Brussels this week," said EU Commission spokesman Daniel Ferrie, refusing to elaborate.

Negotiating teams led by Michel Barnier on the EU side and David Frost on the British end have struggled for months to make progress and have three fundamental issues left to deal with.

The EU wants to make sure British firms will not go low on regulation and high on subsidies to undercut EU companies if any deal on zero tariffs and zero quotas is agreed upon. The member states have also become ardent in demanding legal guarantees on governance of any deal since Johnson last month introduced legislation that breaches the Brexit withdrawal agreement he himself signed with the EU only last year—a move that has demolished trust between the two sides.

"Our position is simple clear and steadfast: If there is no level playing field, there is no access to our market," said France's EU minister, Clement Beaune.

The last crucial issue is about fishing rights, which affects only a fraction of GDP on both sides but has gained symbolic heft. Britain demands to fully rule its waves, while France and others have big fishing industries to accommodate.

If Britain has made it already legally binding that it will not extend a transition period beyond Jan. 1, that deadline seems set in stone.

The EU has said that any agreement will take about two months for legal ratification, translation into the many EU languages and for approval from the EU parliament, making for an effective cutoff date around Nov. 1.

During the negotiations on the withdrawal deal since the 2016 U.K. referendum to leave, both sides often threatened with deadlines, but still found a belated agreement last year on the U.K. departure.

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