

EU summit considers extension of Brexit deadline

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European Union (EU) leaders will decide today whether to grant UK Prime Minister Theresa May an extension to enable her to pass her EU withdrawal deal in the UK parliament.

May has called for an extension to June 30, with the option of bringing this forward if the withdrawal agreement with the EU is ratified. Without an extension, the UK is set to leave the EU without a deal on Friday at 11:00 p.m.

Yesterday, May met separately with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, hoping to secure the backing of the EU's two heavyweight powers. It was yet another public humiliation.

There was universal scepticism towards her meeting a June 30 deadline, amid reports of little progress in talks between May and Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn on an alternative Brexit proposal that might pass through parliament.

Macron was reported before the meeting as opposing the proposal of EU President Donald Tusk that the UK be granted a “flexible” delay of up to 12 months—a “flection.” The deal would “last only as long as necessary and no longer than one year,” according to Tusk’s draft—to be terminated if and when the deal can be passed in the British parliament. The Netherlands, Austria, Spain, Greece and Romania were also reported as opposed.

Following May’s talks with Merkel, whom the UK media held out as more amenable to May, an evasive statement said only that the two had agreed “on the importance of ensuring Britain’s orderly withdrawal.” Merkel said curtly that EU leaders would discuss a “flection” today.

This was a diplomatic response, after Germany’s EU affairs minister Michael Roth earlier complained that “absolutely nothing has changed” in Westminster. He

added, “It’s groundhog-day again ... Unfortunately I have to say that the conditions the European Council has decided on in its last meeting have not been met. This means time will run out on 12 April.”

Regarding May’s June 30 date request, Roth said, “Of course we are also thinking about such a deadline extension, including a long extension of the deadline, but this also has to come with very strict criteria.”

A meeting of the EU’s General Affairs Council in Luxembourg ended with no maximum end extension date agreed, with potential dates including December 31 and March 31 suggested. But this was packaged with strict conditions including UK participation in May’s European Parliament elections, no re-opening of the withdrawal agreement, and some form of legally binding guarantee that the UK would honour its pledge of “sincere co-operation” in ongoing EU business until it leaves.

Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Italy, Luxembourg, Belgium, Sweden and Hungary all indicated they would support a Brexit extension. Chief Brexit Negotiator Michel Barnier told the media that there was continuing support for working with May, on the basis that her deal with them was the only one on offer and that British MPs had to accept it.

Central to the EU calculations, he said, would be “pressure you might want to assert on British parliamentarians ... If the UK wishes to leave the EU in an orderly fashion, the only way to do so is based on the Withdrawal Agreement which we agreed upon together ... the Political Declaration [accompanying the Agreement text] ... can be improved...”

French officials made clear that a deal was possible, but stressed that any extension must be conditional on clauses inserted into any extension agreement that could be reviewed every few months to see if the UK was upholding a “code of conduct” regarding its votes at EU minister meetings. A “weighting point,” possibly set for

October, when a conduct review could take place, is also mooted. “The longer the period is, the stronger the guarantee needs to be,” an official said, adding that an extension “by a year seems to us too long.”

This was after Jacob Rees-Mogg, an influential leader of the ruling Conservatives’ “hard Brexit” wing, said last Friday that the UK should “veto any increase in the budget, obstruct the putative EU army and block Mr Macron’s integrationist schemes.”

May might negotiate an extension with all sorts of conditions but might not be there to ensure it is honoured. Pointing to the EU’s problem with accepting May as a negotiating partner, Rees-Mogg tweeted, “Parliament cannot bind its successors, the Prime Minister’s promises have not invariably proved reliable and there has been little sincerity from the EU.”

After failing to remove May in a confidence vote last December—which meant that May cannot be challenged via that route for a further year—sections of the hard Brexit wing are still insistent on her removal. On Monday, Tory MP and Vice Chairman of the pro-Brexit European Research Group, Mark Francois, wrote to the leader of the backbench 1922 Committee Chair, Sir Graham Brady, demanding he hold an “indicative vote” among Conservative MPs—prior to the European Council meeting—as to whether they still had confidence in May as party leader.

May has already pledged to step down as party leader and prime minister on the proviso that MPs pass her EU deal.

The pro-Remain MP majority have sought to strengthen their position over the last weeks by taking control over parliament’s order paper regarding Brexit. On Tuesday, in May’s absence, parliament debated and passed by a large majority of 310, a motion legally binding the prime minister to seek a Brexit extension until June 30 and ruling out the no-deal Brexit the Tory right has insisted remains the default option. Indicating the divisions in parliament, 100 Tory MPs rebelled. However, the cross-party bill put by Blairite Labour MP Yvette Cooper, which became law Monday night after MPs pushed it through both of parliament’s Houses, was somewhat pyrrhic given that May was already seeking an extension.

Faced with the greatest crisis of British imperialism since the war, the ruling class are still looking to Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn to agree a “national unity” deal over Brexit. Further talks between the government and Labour shadow ministers John McDonnell, Keir Starmer, Rebecca Long-Bailey and Sue Hayman were held

Tuesday. Downing Street said the “productive and wide-ranging talks” lasting over four hours will resume Thursday following the EU summit.

Labour is articulating the concerns of dominant sections of the ruling elite who view maintenance of a customs union and access to the EU’s single market as imperative. Shadow Chancellor McDonnell said a customs union was the first item on the agenda, adding, “What there hasn’t been sufficient discussion of so far is alignment with the single market.” The *Daily Telegraph* reported that May could offer Labour MPs a second “confirmatory” referendum to get their agreement to pass her deal.

However, Corbyn heads a party that is as divided as the Tories on Brexit. Around 80 pro-Remain Blairite MPs are insisting that Labour demands a second referendum as a condition for any agreement and have the backing of top figures including Corbyn’s main ally, McDonnell. But there are 25 Labour MPs, led by party Chairman Ian Lavery, bitterly opposed to a second referendum. Lavery has warned that the party could split. Shadow Transport Secretary Andy McDonald said Monday there would be no need for a second referendum if Corbyn secures a deal with May that meets Labour’s demands for a customs union and close relationship with the single market.

Regardless of the EU’s decision today, the Brexit crisis can only intensify. With the latest deadline for the withdrawal deal lapsing, the May government had to formally notify the country that the legal groundwork was in place for the UK to participate in the upcoming European elections. An election date was set for May 23. If the elections go ahead, they will be a focus for explosive tensions over Brexit, with the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which won the 2014 elections, and the Brexit Party, led by former UKIP leader Nigel Farage, expected to do well.



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