European Union continues talks with Johnson government over possible Brexit deal

Robert Stevens
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The European Union (EU) agreed to accelerate discussions over the weekend with the UK over the terms of a Brexit agreement.

On Friday, leading EU figures said that there was a basis for more talks following new proposals made by Prime Minister Boris Johnson at a meeting Thursday with Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar.

The deadline for Britain to leave the EU is October 31, with Johnson threatening for months to do so without a deal if necessary.

EU Council President Donald Tusk said Friday morning that up until hearing of the proposals from Varadkar, he had been preparing to say that there was no basis for a deal before the upcoming two-day EU Summit on October 17 and "no more chances". However, Johnson and Varadkar "both saw for the first time a pathway to a deal… even the slightest chance must be used."

Technical talks were held for nearly two and a half hours Friday morning in Brussels between EU chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier and the UK Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay. Following what the EU Commission described as "constructive" talks between the two, the EU "agreed to intensify discussions over the coming days."

The *Financial Times* cited a diplomat stating that, after having flatly rejected Johnson's previous proposals, the new talks should "not be qualified as a major breakthrough… more like, let's give it a try."

While not sharing details of Johnson's new proposals, Barnier told diplomats from the other 27 EU states that the UK had accepted that there cannot be a "border across the island of Ireland."

Talks would now enter a secretive format of negotiations known as the "tunnel"—used by Johnson's predecessor Theresa May during the final round of negotiations that led to her signing the EU Withdrawal Agreement last November. That deal was rejected three times by parliament, with the Tory majority hard-Brexit wing leading opposition, resulting in May's replacement by Johnson in July.

Prior to his talks with Varadkar, Johnson submitted an offer to the EU, emphatically rejected, proposing that Northern Ireland would stay in the EU's single market for good but with a two-border customs system in place with dispersed customs checks across the Republic of Ireland. Moreover, this would only continue after four years if both the Republican and Unionist parties consented by a twin majority. This gave the Tories' de facto coalition partners, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), an effective veto.

Speculation mounted Friday that Johnson was prepared to water down proposals over what he wants to replace the Irish "backstop". The backstop was agreed by May and the EU to prevent a hard border and customs checks, post-Brexit, between Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK, and the Republic. With an EU "diplomat" stating that Barnier had told member states that Britain now accepted that there could be no customs border, this alone justified "going into intensified talks with Britain over the weekend."

Questioned by the press Friday, Johnson refused to say that Northern Ireland would leave the EU Customs Union, as he previously insisted, replying vaguely, "The whole of the UK will be able to take full advantage of Brexit." With suggestions that Johnson had proposed keeping the North in a customs union—i.e., separate from the rest of the UK, with a border down the Irish Sea—and replacing the double veto with a simple majority vote in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the DUP reiterated its opposition to any backstop arrangement being implemented. DUP leader

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Arlene Foster said she was opposed to anything, "whether UK or NI only… that traps Northern Ireland in the European Union… The prime minister is very mindful of that."

Even if Johnson is able to secure a deal, he would have to win over the DUP, or some or all of the 21 rebels in his own Conservative Party, as well as a section of the 20 or so Leave-supporting Labour MPs opposed to a no-deal Brexit.

The major figures in the pro-Remain camp have yet to speak on the possible deal, but such an outcome would be a body blow to their plans. If the EU signs a deal with the UK, the Remain forces can no longer guarantee that there will be a majority in parliament against Johnson that could secure their preferred outcome of a cross-party government of national unity tasked with reversing Brexit. What is critical for these forces is not securing a "better" deal with the EU than May but putting in place the mechanisms to overturn the 2016 Brexit result.

The main political forces behind this are the Blairites who dominate the Parliamentary Labour Party who ensured last month the passage of the [Hilary] Benn Act in Parliament to force Johnson—in the event he could not reach a deal with Brussels by October 19—to request a Brexit delay of at least three months.

Seeking to ensure that Johnson's minority government is not able to hold a general election on his terms, with the Tories claiming to represent the "will of the people" on Brexit, as defined by the 2016 referendum result, they have stepped up their plotting. Most attention has been focused on changing Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's position to one of supporting holding a second referendum on Brexit before a general election is held. Corbyn has offered to lead a "caretaker government" with the sole task of averting a no-deal Brexit, before stepping down and calling a general election. He frames a second referendum as one with a choice between a new deal negotiated by Labour and a vote to Remain.

None of this has to date been acceptable to the Blairites, Liberal Democrats and pro-Remain Tories, who have repeatedly stated that they will not accept Corbyn as a caretaker prime minister and want a referendum before any general election.

On Thursday, the *Independent* reported that "Labour MPs are blitzing Jeremy Corbyn with demands for a U-turn that would see him throw his weight behind a fresh Brexit referendum before a general election.

"The whips' office is receiving 'dozens of phone calls', The *Independent* understands—reflecting the 'almost unanimous' support amongst rank-and-file MPs for a Final Say vote to come first."

During the Brexit crisis, Corbyn has emerged as the main prop of a Tory government by working to subordinate the working class to the Remain wing of the ruling class. Even as Theresa May's government was collapsing, Corbyn entered "national unity" talks with her for six weeks over the terms of a Brexit deal that would guarantee access to the Single European Market.

After having called for a general election for two years, he then acceded to the demands of the Blairites that no vote of confidence would be called in Johnson, lest this led to a no-deal Brexit going ahead anyway after a Tory win in a general election.

Corbyn has capitulated to the Blairites to such an extent that *Times* political editor Francis Elliott commented in an op-ed column Thursday that "Mr Corbyn's preference is, in some ways, beside the point. He has been repeatedly warned that a significant number—perhaps even a majority—of Labour MPs would defy a whip to back an election before Brexit is resolved." The *Times* stressed in particular that Corbyn did not even have the support of his key allies, with Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott both favouring a referendum being held first and McDonnell describing a general election as "a trap."

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