



## The Brussels view of Brexit

by Charles Grant

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**The EU is no longer as united as it was on how to handle the British. But just about everyone working on Brexit in the EU's institutions and governments is fed up with them, and they do not believe that Britain's politicians are capable of getting their act together and resolving the problem. Many people in Brussels expect a further extension of Article 50, well into 2020.**

Ever since the British referendum of June 2016, the EU has maintained an impressive degree of unity. The 27 member-states and the EU institutions understood that they would be in a stronger position vis-à-vis the UK if they kept together. And they did so, under the leadership of the European Commission, France and Germany.

But last month's European Council revealed cracks in the EU which are unlikely to disappear quickly and could widen. There are two sets of divisions – on tactics and on substance – but they overlap. On tactics, there was an argument at the summit over the best way to get the British Parliament to ratify the withdrawal agreement. Michel Barnier, leading Task Force 50 in the Commission, and Emmanuel Macron, the French president, argued that the British would not work out what they wanted unless faced with the precipice of a no deal exit. Macron and Barnier therefore pushed for a short extension of only a few weeks or months.

The opposing camp – including European Council President Donald Tusk, Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker and most member-states – considered that a long extension would make hard-line eurosceptic MPs fear losing Brexit altogether, and therefore vote for Theresa May's deal in Parliament. This camp had other arguments against a short extension, too: an acrimonious or hard Brexit would threaten western coherence at a time when autocratic leaders – such as Putin, Trump and Erdoğan – were working hard to undermine the multilateral order in general and the EU in particular (Chancellor Angela Merkel made this argument). And they did not want the EU to be blamed for any disorder that followed the UK crashing out; the world had to see that the UK was responsible for its own fate. This camp wanted an extension of nine or 12 months. In the end the compromise between Macron and the other leaders was for an extension of six months, until October 31<sup>st</sup>, unless May was able to pass her deal sooner.

This split on tactics mirrors, if imperfectly, a division over substance: should the British stay in the EU or not? On that question it is harder to work out who is in which camp, since several governments have said little in public on the desirability of Brexit – and some of them are in fact divided internally. But the ‘we are better off without the British’ camp includes Task Force 50, France and Spain (the Spanish being content with a long extension on the tactical question).

Most of the arguments made by those in the Out camp double up as arguments against a long extension of Article 50. They say that the UK should not be allowed to ‘pollute’ the European political system with its strange eurosceptic politics: they fear that a Boris Johnson-led government or a European Parliament dominated by the antics of Nigel Farage and his continental friends could enable hard-Brexiteers to disrupt EU business from the inside. In any case Britain’s continued presence in the club would give a boost to eurosceptic forces across the continent. And it would distract leaders from thinking about what Macron has called a European ‘Renaissance’, that is to say his [plans for big EU reforms](#). In any case, say proponents of Britain leaving, what would be the benefit of another referendum if Remain won by 52 to 48? There would soon be talk of a third referendum, and the UK would inevitably be a truculent and difficult member, blocking all moves to integration.

The counter-arguments are well-rehearsed, for example that the UK gives the EU geopolitical heft, that a reversal of Brexit would be a big boost to pro-EU political forces and that Britain’s presence would make the EU more strategic, Atlanticist and economically liberal. The camp which would like the UK to stay includes Tusk, Juncker, Ireland, Portugal, Poland and Hungary. There are varying views in Germany, though many senior figures in the government would be happy to see Brexit reversed. The views of the Swedish government are probably typical of many: on balance it would like the British in the EU, but it is so fed up with the dysfunctionality of their government over the past three years that it is unwilling to make special efforts to facilitate a reversal. Its priority is ensuring that the Brexit process doesn’t damage the EU.

These arguments over Brexit are becoming entangled with other points of contention, such as Macron’s behaviour at summits, and Barnier’s ambition for the Commission presidency. Macron is not popular with some permanent representatives and EU officials, because of his strident and uncompromising performance at the April European Council. The annoyance is not just about Brexit: recently France voted against the mandate for trade talks with the US that had been specially crafted to meet French concerns, despite Macron having apparently assured EU leaders that he would not oppose it. He has also opposed a number of other EU measures, including a statement on Libya that criticised General Haftar’s attack on the UN-backed government in Tripoli and had to be watered down to satisfy France.

Macron’s mercurial style sometimes grates. French officials have on occasion said that he would take a certain line, only for him to show up and take a different stance. EU officials expect the French to become more ‘reasonable’ after the European elections, which are of great concern to Macron and his aides. Some of the key people in Paris seem to think that if France is seen to be very tough in EU councils, including when it is outvoted, Macron’s La République en Marche party will profit at the expense of Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National.

Though Barnier is not a *Spitzenkandidat*, that is to say an official candidate of one of the main groups in the European Parliament for the presidency of the Commission, he is a strong contender for that job. Many governments and MEPs think he has conducted the Brexit talks in a professional, sober and serious manner, and that he would make a competent president. Others argue that he lacks the stature required, having never been a head of government, that he is insufficiently economically liberal or that

he is too close to France. France (like Germany) is perceived as enjoying disproportionate influence in the EU already.

Barnier hails from the conservative EPP group, which is likely to end up with the largest number of MEPs, while Macron will probably line up with the liberal ALDE group. Nevertheless in recent weeks some of Macron's advisers have been touting Barnier's name in national capitals. This may not help him a great deal: both EU and member-state officials say that Barnier's strong support for the French position on Article 50 has raised questions over his independence from Paris, and thus may have damaged his prospects of the presidency.

Barnier has invested years of his life into the Brexit withdrawal agreement and, understandably, remains strongly committed to it. Some of those within the Commission who are not fans of Barnier are becoming rather less fulsome in their praise for the way he has managed the Brexit process.

Some officials say, perhaps for dramatic effect, that the withdrawal agreement is dead. They mean at least two different things when they say that. One is that the more Article 50 is extended, the more the withdrawal agreement's provisions on the transition and budgetary contributions will need updating and revising (but the Irish backstop cannot be altered, officials make clear).

The agreement is also dead in the sense that the current British Parliament is simply incapable of passing it. EU officials are sceptical that the talks between the Conservative and Labour Parties will achieve anything; they think it is not in Jeremy Corbyn's interest to facilitate a Tory Brexit. Officials think that MPs are unlikely to vote for a softer version of Brexit – with an amended political declaration – than for May's deal, because they are incapable of agreeing on any particular version of leaving the EU. Britain is becoming too polarised, they say. Nor do they take seriously the argument that, if faced with the cliff edge of no further extension, Parliament would ultimately rally around the best-placed alternative to no deal. They think that the EU will continue to extend Article 50 rather than be seen to promote no deal (both schools of thought on the desirability of a long extension believe that a further extension is likely).

EU officials don't trust British MPs to prevent no deal and some of them think it could happen by accident. For example, what if a Boris Johnson-type figure became prime minister in October, and he or she was determined to leave without a deal? That person would refuse to ask for an extension and Parliament would not have time to bring down the government and prevent no deal before October 31st (to which the counter-argument is that no prime minister committed to a no deal Brexit could ever win a parliamentary majority for forming a government in the first place).

Some senior figures in Brussels expect the British to receive an extension till June 2020. That is the latest possible date for the EU to agree on its next seven-year budget plan, the multiannual financial framework that starts in 2021, without serious problems arising. In the long run the UK would have to go for an election or referendum or no deal – or possibly a different kind of Brexit, said one figure. But would not Macron veto further extensions? "No, he could not resist the pressure from all the others in the room to compromise."

Another official agrees that the 27 are unlikely to force the UK out by refusing a further extension, but adds that this could change if the British elected a fearsome swarm of Farage MPs in the European elections. Similarly, a new government led by a hard-line eurosceptic committed to starting fights with the EU could lead the patience of some member-states to snap.

In any argument over an extension, the British can probably count on the Irish to support extending Article 50. Irish diplomats and politicians are as fed up as anyone, but they know that a no deal scenario would be very bad for Ireland, both economically and in terms of security. There would have to be checks of some sort on or near the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic – lest the EU insist on controls on goods passing from Ireland into the other 26 member-states.

The conduct of the British political class has eroded much of the goodwill that European politicians and officials felt towards the UK. If the British wish to avoid no deal by asking for further extensions they should avoid losing the remaining goodwill that still lingers in certain capitals. It would help if the British government came clean with the British people about the inevitable trade-offs that Brexit involves; if the UK sent ministers to Brussels who knew a little about how the EU works; and if British politicians avoided playing to the gallery at home with gratuitous insults (such as Johnson's comparison of the EU and Nazi Germany, or Jeremy Hunt's comparison of the EU and the Soviet Union). Best of all, the EU would like the British government to have a plan for getting the UK out of the mess it is in. If the government said that it needed more time in order to take a new approach to Brexit, or organise a general election or referendum, the EU would almost certainly extend Article 50.

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