



EU gives UK two-week deadline on Brexit divorce bill

Michel Barnier says progress is needed on financial settlement as Irish border issue emerges as challenge for UK government

Daniel Boffey and Jennifer Rankin in Brussels

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The EU's chief Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, has set the British government a deadline of two weeks to give "vital" clarification on the financial commitments it is willing to honour, at the end of a sixth round of Brexit talks that offered scant evidence of any progress.

The issue of the border on the island of Ireland has also emerged as a serious challenge for the UK government, with the Irish demanding an urgent and definite commitment that a solution in effect keeping northern Ireland in the single market and the customs union will be found to ensure there is no return to a hard border.

At a joint press conference in Brussels on Friday, the UK's Brexit secretary, David Davis, implored Barnier and the EU27 to be flexible and move on to discussions about a future relationship, adding that there was a need to "build confidence" in the talks on the UK side.

Barnier, however, offered the British government little succour, instead insisting that the

decision would be made by the member states at a leaders' summit in December and that it would be "absolutely vital" to hear soon from Britain on its intentions with regard to its estimated €60bn (£53bn) divorce bill [paywall].

Asked whether it was necessary, as has been suggested in reports, for the British to provide clarity on their intentions within a fortnight, the EU chief negotiator responded bluntly: "My answer is yes."

Barnier, who noted it had been 500 days since Britain voted to leave, said he needed to establish an "objective interpretation" of Theresa May's pledge in her Florence speech that no EU member state would lose out as a result of Britain's withdrawal, and that budget commitments would be honoured.

"This is absolutely vital if we are to achieve sufficient progress in December," he said. Barnier repeatedly demanded "real and sincere progress". "If that's not the case, then we will continue and that will pull back the opening of discussions on the future," he said.

Separately, Konrad Szymański, Poland's minister for European affairs, urged the UK to make an offer on the financial settlement as soon as possible. "Of course if we can't make a deal in December we have to find another date, but it could be problematic because of internal procedural aspects both on European side and British side," he said on a visit to Brussels.

Szymański, who recently attended the Conservative party conference, said he was worried about no-deal rhetoric from the UK. "The beauty of the most simple solutions is always tempting in politics. I understand why [no deal] is still so popular, but from a responsible point of view it is no solution."

EU leaders need to decide at a summit on 14 and 15 December whether sufficient progress has been made on preliminary issues – the divorce bill, citizens' rights and the Irish border – to allow the talks to move on to future relations, a stage Britain is desperate to reach.

Despite claims from both sides last month that the Brexit negotiations were set to accelerate after October's summit, no significant movement appears to have been made by either side to allow the talks to develop.

Questioned about the financial settlement, Davis simply repeated the wording used by May in Florence. He added: "There is no doubt that we have made, and continue to make, including in this round, significant progress on a whole range of issues ... That will continue at pace between now and December and I hope it will lead to sufficient progress."

Davis rejected the suggestion that Northern Ireland could stay within the customs union or the single market, just as the Northern Ireland secretary, James Brokenshire, had done earlier in the week.

Davis, who admitted there had been "frank discussions" on the issue, said: "We respect the European Union's desire to protect the legal order of the single market and customs union. But that cannot come at cost to the constitutional and economic integrity of the United Kingdom."

Although there would need to be "specific solutions" for the unique position of Northern Ireland, Davis continued, "this cannot amount to creating a new border inside our United Kingdom".

The position has irritated the Irish government, which insists that it is not involved in a constitutional land grab. It believes that the UK's signature to vague commitments so far does not add up to sufficient progress on the issue. Dublin has rejected the UK's position paper on the issue, and said the use of technology to ease trade flows on the island would not suffice.

Arrangements acceptable to the EU would include those adapted for Hong Kong and Macau, which are part of China but also individual members of the WTO operating different trade regimes.

On Friday, the Irish taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, noted that the Isle of Man was not a member of either the UK or the EU and traded with each under a protocol to the Treaty of Rome and applying EU law.

Barnier refused to be drawn on the impact of the instability of the UK cabinet, from which two ministers have recently been forced to quit.

He said: "I am not going to comment on the internal political situation in the United Kingdom. We are, of course, watching it very closely."

He added that there had been progress in the area of citizens' rights, and welcomed the government's publication of a streamlined application system for EU nationals living in the UK who want to stay after Brexit.

But he said work remained on the issues of family reunification, the exporting of social security benefits and the role of the European court of justice in ensuring the consistent application of case law in the EU and the UK.

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