

COMMENT

Prime Minister Johnson: Brexit and the EU27's Perspective

Anthony Salamone | 24 July 2019



[© 2017 European Union](#)

The ascendancy of Boris Johnson to the office of UK prime minister, viewed from the rest of the EU, seems surreal. Johnson is widely considered by EU governments to be a joker and caricature of maladroitness. During his turbulent tenure as foreign secretary, fellow EU foreign ministers were remarkably public and frank in expressing their lack of respect for him, due to his many perceived failings.

While the EU27 and EU institutions will of course now work with Johnson, the reputation which he fostered is unlikely to stand him or the UK in any good stead in the weeks and months ahead. For many, Johnson's elevation as the UK's political leader epitomises the deep malaise that currently afflicts British politics.

During the Conservative leadership campaign, and in his inaugural Downing Street speech, Johnson made highly contradictory pledges on Brexit. He asserted his intention to keep the current EU withdrawal date of 31 October, to renegotiate the withdrawal terms, and to preferably leave the EU with a deal. Those three objectives, in combination, are impossible.

Since the UK's latest Brexit extension, the EU27 have only strengthened their resolve against renegotiating the withdrawal agreement – including the Irish backstop. Even if the EU did agree to renegotiate, the time remaining between now and the end of October would not be sufficient. Brussels will practically shut down for August, and the EU would need time to agree common positions and secure European Parliament approval. That would probably leave about five or six weeks – from the EU's perspective, a single round of negotiations (as these usually take four weeks).

While the EU remains fixed on the UK's withdrawal terms, it has made clear its openness to reformulating the political declaration on the future EU-UK relationship – non-binding, but not

unimportant. Depending on the content, the declaration could probably be changed in a matter of days. It is questionable though whether amending the declaration will change anyone's mind in Westminster.

The EU27 will continue to insist on the Irish backstop under any circumstance – Johnson's focal point of discontent. If Ireland decides to indicate room for compromise on the backstop, the other 26 will largely follow that lead. A possible option is to revert the scope of the backstop back to EU's original proposal of just Northern Ireland, instead of the entire UK. The UK would then be able to conduct an independent trade policy for Great Britain, subject to the EU-UK relationship. However, Johnson, like May, is reliant on the DUP for his government's survival, so he is unlikely to support such a change. Otherwise, the EU27 do not want to renegotiate and see little scope to do so.

In his Downing Street speech, Johnson made a very notable attempt to blame the prospect of a no-deal Brexit on the EU. The reality, of course, is that the UK's political crisis is entirely of its own making. The EU has long anticipated such a blame-game from the UK, but the general view is that the EU27 are well past caring how they are vilified by the Brexiteers.

The EU patently does not want a no-deal Brexit, but it is unlikely to be fazed by British threats of no deal, for two main reasons. First, the EU – especially the European Commission – believes that it is prepared for no deal, and that it is better prepared than the UK. Second, the EU27 are convinced that a no-deal scenario would not last for very long, with the UK anxiously seeking talks in short order and the EU in an even stronger negotiating position than now.

The EU is also acutely aware of the political uncertainty and parliamentary arithmetic in the UK. Even if EU leaders were persuaded to compromise more, they have little reason to believe that Johnson could secure the support of the Commons on Brexit, or indeed that his administration will be in office for any length of time. Moreover, they know that a general election or EU referendum may soon follow, neither of which is guaranteed to go his way. For the EU, it would hardly seem sensible to make substantive concessions to such a tenuous government with no clear prospect of success, even if they wanted to do so – and they do not.

The campaign rhetoric on Brexit from Johnson and his supporters put much emphasis on personalities and emotion, and neglected facts and circumstances. Blaming the Commission, Ireland or the EU for failings around Brexit is simply a diversion. British politics created Brexit, and the process of Brexit has been made infinitely more complicated by political divisions between and within the political parties at Westminster. It is not the EU's fault, and of course the EU's response to Brexit has been to protect its own interests – that can hardly be a surprise.

A central aspect of the malaise afflicting British politics is the blindness across Westminster to the UK's diminishing importance in the world – and Brexit's role as an accelerant. Whatever Johnson or any prime minister does, the EU will always have the upper hand when it comes to terms, trade and regulation – simply for the fact that it is much larger economically and politically than the UK. That is the future which awaits the UK, should Brexit happen. If Johnson and his following grasped that reality, perhaps they would begin to appreciate the true depths of the UK's political crisis – which, of course, they facilitated.