

No Brexit without backstop, says EU Parliament President

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News

Antonio Tajani says that without a backstop agreement, the European Parliament cannot allow the UK's divorce from the EU to go ahead.



European Parliament President Antonio Tajani has hammered home the message that MEPs “will not accept” any Brexit deal unless it involves a so-called ‘backstop’ for Northern Ireland.

Speaking at a news conference on Thursday, Tajani said, “As far as we are concerned, this is key. Without agreement on a backstop, parliament will not be able to vote in favour of the withdrawal agreement.”

Tajani was addressing reporters on the first full day of an EU summit once again dominated by the stalled Brexit negotiations.

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At a dinner on Wednesday night between EU leaders, UK Prime Minister Theresa May is thought to have suggested a third transitional year after the UK leaves the EU next March to try to resolve the deadlock over the Irish border issue.

Tajani said he plans to visit Ireland soon “to explain parliament’s position, which is in full support of the Irish Republic.”

EU CITIZENS COME FIRST

On the Irish border issue Tajani said, “We want a flexible border and to preserve the Good Friday Agreement, but we also want to protect our agri-food sector, industry and health.”

“We have got to find a way of addressing the border question but, I repeat, we must have an agreement on the backstop.”

“None of us should be surprised given this is how the British government has always negotiated. We know their tactics. We know what they are trying to do, and that is to deliberately delay and sabotage any agreement in the hope of the EU backing down at the 11th hour”

Citing May’s reported preference for an extension of the Withdrawal Agreement transition period, Tajani told reporters, “Reference has been made to three, not two, years and we are in favour of this.”

Speaking earlier as he arrived for the resumption of the summit, Tajani said, “The first point is to defend the rights of EU citizens living in the UK, the second one is related to the UK honouring existing financial commitments. “

“On the first two issues, there is an agreement, more or less. The third point that we want to defend is the Good Friday Agreement. For this, we want a backstop that is workable and legally operational for Northern Ireland. To this end, the best solution would be for a border in the Irish Sea. We are also open to a three-year transition, if this can help to find a solution.”

“I think that Mrs May wants a deal. Our proposal is clear. We support Michel Barnier and are united, both Members States and European institutions. The European Parliament will not vote in favour of an agreement unless all three issues are solved.”

UK “STALLING FOR TIME”

As she arrived for Thursday’s meeting, May told reporters that the EU’s original proposal for an Irish backstop was “unacceptable” because she said it would have meant “a border in the Irish Sea.”

She went on to say that the possible extension was, at this stage, only “an idea”, adding that it would extend implementation of the withdrawal agreement “only by a matter of months.”

She said she still expected the implementation period to come to an end, as scheduled, by December 2020.

However, May’s idea for an extension to the transition period was lambasted by Gabi Zimmer, GUE/NGL leader and member of the Parliament’s Brexit Steering Group.

“After another wasted EU summit in which Theresa May yet again failed to lay out the UK’s position on the Irish backstop, the EU negotiators need to wise up to the fact that they may have fallen for the oldest trick in the book.”

“With Brexit now just five months away and everybody still in the dark over what the UK intends to do in order to protect The Good Friday Agreement, the UK is clearly stalling for time in the hope of last-minute concessions,” The German MEP said.

VITRIOL A-PLENTY

Zimmer said that the British government was trying to renege on its commitments to the ‘backstop’ agreement from December 2017 and March 2018, which she called “a clear violation” of the European Parliament’s red lines.

“This is not a game - this affects the lives of millions across our continent.... It is beyond acceptable that the British government is willing to play games with the lives of millions of EU nationals living in Britain and British citizens living in the EU27.”

“However, none of us should be surprised given this is how the British government has always negotiated. We know their tactics. We know what they are trying to do, and that is to deliberately delay and sabotage any agreement in the hope of the EU backing down at the 11th hour,” Zimmer added.

May’s official spokesperson said, “We’ve shown we can do difficult deals together constructively. I remain confident for a good outcome and the last stage requires trust and leadership on both sides.”

About the author

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