

BREXIT BRIEF

Brexit Brief Issue 104
23 February 2021



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Introduction

The Brief seeks to provide up-to-date information on the progress and content of the UK-EU negotiations, and bring together relevant statements and policy positions from key players in Ireland, the UK and the EU.

The Brief is part of a wider communications programme covering the work of the IIEA's UK Project Group – including commentaries, speeches, texts and event reports – which are highlighted on the Institute's website. (www.iiea.com)

Section One: State of Play

Difficult Weeks

All comments on the post-Brexit situation must take account of the COVID-19 crisis.

The first seven weeks of the post-Brexit era have produced controversy and difficulty in many areas, intensified existing political and social frictions on the island of Ireland, between the islands of Ireland and Britain, and raised serious questions about the future of EU-UK relations. It has also created some unexpected friction in the Dublin-Brussels relationship.

The changed arrangements for trade between the UK and the EU and the new regulations and customs procedures have led to serious

interruptions in commercial and manufacturing supply chains and to delays in movement of goods. A new, highly bureaucratic system has come into operation. Business and consumer representatives have directed a volume of complaints to the administrations in Dublin, London, Belfast and Brussels. Arguments about 'teething troubles' have dominated media discussions.

The basic post-Brexit problems and concerns have been taken to a new level of intensity in Northern Ireland as the Withdrawal Agreement Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland entered into force, involving the controversial 'border in the Irish Sea' and the introduction of checks and extensive paperwork in respect of many economic and trade sectors. The debacle of the Commission decision to trigger Article 16 of

the Protocol in a dispute concerning COVID-19 vaccine supplies has provoked an intense, angry response in unionism and created tension in UK-EU relations while causing grave concern in Irish government circles.

The DUP, under pressure in opinion polls from the Traditional Ulster Voice, has embarked on a concerted campaign to remove the Protocol in its entirety - a Five Point Programme, a Westminster Parliamentary Petition, a *Telegraph* article by Arlene Foster, pressure on UK ministers and utilisation of links with the hard line Brexit wing of the Tory Party. The party indicated that cross-border contacts and dialogue with parties and groups in the Republic will be discontinued.

Both the EU and the Dublin and London Governments have rejected the DUP call to do away with the Protocol. The Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič said that the UK and EU had a "shared commitment to the proper implementation of the Protocol" UK Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster Michael Gove told the House of Commons that there were "disruptions and difficulties faced by Northern Ireland citizens in their daily lives that need to be resolved. They can be resolved within the context of the Protocol." Foreign Minister Simon Coveney said that Dublin is open to modest adjustments but insisted that the agreement is not subject to renegotiation.

Michel Barnier, the EU's Chief Negotiator through the long processes of dialogue and decision, told the European Business Summit on 11 February that "Both parties must be conscious of their responsibilities in applying this Protocol. The difficulties on the island of Ireland are caused by Brexit, not by the Protocol. The Protocol is the solution."

The Taoiseach, Micheal Martin, speaking to UK media, called on both the EU and the UK to "dial down the rhetoric" arguing that there were "elements the British Government could sort out, but likewise on the European side, I would say some member states need to cool it as well."

Two quotes from recent commentaries convey a positive message, based on recognition of the relatively short timescale of the post-Brexit changes and the related problems and challenges:

We all know that when an aeroplane takes off, that's the point when you sometimes get that increased level of turbulence. But then eventually you reach a cruising altitude and the crew tell you to take your seatbelts off, and enjoy a gin and tonic and some peanuts. We're not at the gin and tonic and peanuts stage yet but I'm confident we will be.

- Michael Gove, Chancellor

Brexit is a process not an event and the winners and losers will only become clear over time.

- Mark Gregory, UK Chief Economist of EY.

Article 16 – von der Leyen Regrets

In the aftermath of the Commission's withdrawal of its proposed use of Article 16 of the Protocol there were attempts to deflect blame for the ensuing disbelief and anger across the EU, and particularly in Dublin, Belfast and London. Foreign Minister Simon Coveney described the Commission's action as "totally out of character in the context of the relationship between the Irish Government and European Commission which has been so close for the last four-and-a-half years of Brexit."

Initially, a Commission spokesman pointed to the cabinet of Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovkis – who succeeded Phil Hogan in the post – and argued that the situation was his responsibility. Commissioner Dombrovkis pushed back, arguing that his office “acted at the request of and with inputs from relevant cabinets and services.” The Health Commissioner, Stella Kyriakides, was mentioned as was the office of the Commission President.

The draft Regulation was rushed through the system, with many officials working from home, and with recourse to an Emergency Procedure which permits action by the Commission without formal consultation of the Member States. Thus, Commissioner Mairead McGuinness was not involved and there was no prior notification of the Irish and UK governments and the Northern Ireland Executive. Nobody appears to have spoken to Michel Barnier. Questions continue to be asked about the process and the mistakes – Whose idea? Who signed off? What went wrong?

President von der Leyen responded to an *Irish Times* question by stating that “The consideration given to invoking Article 16 was dropped before the decision was made final. So, despite the fact that I regret that Article 16 was mentioned in a provisional version of the decision, I am glad that the Commission was quick on its feet to find another solution to address the question at stake.”

In the European Parliament on 10 February 2021, President von der Leyen spoke about the state of play of the COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy. She made specific reference to the Article 16 situation:

And as far as the mechanism goes, allow me a word on the island of Ireland. The

bottom line is that mistakes were made in the process leading up to the decision. And I deeply regret that. But in the end, we got it right. And I can reassure you that my Commission will do its utmost to protect the peace in Northern Ireland. Just as it has done throughout the entire Brexit process.

EU-UK Correspondence and Discussions

Following the withdrawal of the Commission’s move on 29 January to trigger Article 16 of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol, the co-chairs of the Joint Committee on Implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement – Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster Michael Gove and EU Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic- posted identical tweets emphasising that their “shared priority is making sure the Protocol works for the people of Northern Ireland, protecting gains of the peace process and avoiding disruption to everyday lives”.

On 3 February 2021, they held a virtual meeting with the First Minister, Arlene Foster, and deputy First Minister, Michelle O’Neill, of Northern Ireland. A Joint Statement was issued:

“The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Vice-President Šefčovič reiterated their full commitment to the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, and to the proper implementation of the Protocol – protecting the gains of the peace process, maintaining stability, and avoiding disruption to the everyday lives of the people of Northern Ireland and a hard border on the island of Ireland.

Both condemned unreservedly any threats or intimidation, noting that the safety and welfare of the people of Northern Ireland and that of

our staff would always be the utmost priority.

After a constructive discussion amongst all parties, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Vice-President Šefčovič concluded that the UK and the EU would immediately work intensively to find solutions to outstanding issues, to be addressed through the EU-UK Joint Committee. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Vice-President Šefčovič will keep in close contact as this work progresses, and will meet again next week in London."

Michael Gove wrote (by email dated 2 February) to Maros Sefcovic "to set out the rapid action that I believe is now required" and "to report the overwhelming reaction there has been in Northern Ireland, and across these islands, at the events of Friday...Our next steps must reflect and deal with this reality."

Arguing that both sides were aware that there are a number of pressing problems with the operation of the Protocol that must be addressed, Michael Gove outlined six specific proposals – "the minimum set of steps necessary to stabilise the situation and reassure all parties in Northern Ireland." These include extending the interim three and six-month arrangements, or grace periods, for a number of goods, freight systems and medicines to January 2023 and setting out solutions to enable tariff-free movement of certain products:

I must make clear that the UK Government seeks urgent resolution of these problems in the context of our obligations to seek commonly acceptable solutions, and recognising the pressing need to restore confidence among people in Northern Ireland that the Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement is being respected in all its dimensions. If it is not possible to agree a way forward in the way we

propose, then the UK will consider using all instruments at its disposal.

In all cases, what is now required is political, not technical, solutions. A primarily technical approach led to what I know you agree was a grave error on 29 January. Northern Ireland would not be where it is today if the negotiations leading to the 1998 Agreement had been done on a technical and legalistic basis. What is required now is an urgent reset to put the Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement, the people of Northern Ireland, and indeed the island of Ireland, first. I know you appreciate the seriousness of the situation and I am grateful for your constructive and pragmatic approach to these questions.

This communication was received in Brussels with great concern about its tone with Communication sources speaking of an apparent 'ultimatum'. Maroš Šefčovič replied to the Gove letter on 10 February 2021, making positive reference to the virtual meeting with the Northern Ireland ministers but emphasising the EU stance on the main issues.

On that occasion I confirmed again that the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland remains unaffected by the European Union's measures to ensure transparency of vaccine exports. These measures will never entail a hard border on the island of Ireland.

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Union, its single market and its customs union presents unique and significant challenges for the island of Ireland. The Protocol is the solution agreed by the UK and the EU to these challenges: it is the only way to protect the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement,

preserving peace and stability and avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland. It is designed to ensure clarity and predictability for people and businesses, while minimising the disruption inevitably caused by the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. It is a balanced outcome after years of difficult negotiations and is now our mutually agreed legal obligation.

In this context, I would like to draw your attention to a number of current shortcomings preventing the Protocol and our practical arrangements from delivering on the ground. I am convinced that all of these are 'teething problems', for which we should be able to find swift solutions and I am ready to address them, together with the points raised in your letter of 3 February, at our next Joint Committee meeting.

... I would like to recall that blanket derogations from provisions of Union law made applicable in respect of Northern Ireland cannot be agreed beyond what the Protocol foresees already. Finally, as regards the issues of pet travel between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of movements of seed potatoes and other plants and plant products, any flexibility would entail the United Kingdom committing to align with the relevant EU rules.

Vice President Šefčovič travelled to London on 11 February for a direct meeting with Michael Gove. A Joint Statement referred to "frank but constructive discussion" and announced the convening of a meeting of the EU-UK Joint Committee under the Withdrawal Agreement on 24 February 2021.

The co-chairs of the EU-UK Joint Committee on the Withdrawal Agreement – European Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič and the UK Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster Michael Gove – met to prepare the upcoming Joint Committee on the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland and the outstanding issues.

After a frank but constructive discussion, and taking into account the views expressed on 3 February by the First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, the two co-chairs agreed to:

reiterate their full commitment to the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement, and to the proper implementation of the Protocol – protecting the gains of the peace process, maintaining stability, avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland and impacting as little as possible on the everyday life of communities in both Ireland and Northern Ireland

spare no effort to implement solutions mutually agreed on 17 December, as they form a foundation for our cooperation

intensify the work of the Specialised Committee on the Protocol in order to address all outstanding issues, with the shared objective to find workable solutions on the ground

underpin this work by further joint engagement by the UK and the EU with business groups and civic society in Northern Ireland

convene the Joint Committee no later than 24 February to provide the necessary

political steer and approval to this work in the spirit of collaboration, responsibility and pragmatism.

European Parliament Ratification Process

On 28 December 2020 the Council adopted the decision on the signing of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and its provisional application as of 1 January 2021, pending the consent of the European Parliament and a formal Council decision in 2021. The Council decision will be taken once the European Parliament has given its consent and once all procedures necessary for the entry into force have been completed.

In the European Parliament two lead committees were nominated – Foreign Affairs and International Trade – to consider the TCA and recommend consent (or not) to the European Parliament. The lead committees assess each sector of the deal with the specialised committees providing opinions. The Committees have appointed rapporteurs who will prepare and present their draft report – Kati Piri MEP (Socialist, Netherlands) for Foreign Affairs and Christophe Hansen MEP (EPP, Luxembourg) for International Trade).

Once the committees have approved their recommendation the full House is set to vote before the provisional application lapses. The EU side is expected to seek an extension beyond the two-month period because of issues of translation and the COVID-19 situation. Separately, the full Parliament will also vote on an accompanying Resolution outlining its political position, prepared by the UK Coordination Group and the Conference of Presidents.

Prime Minister at Question Time

On 2 February 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson replied to questions in the House of Commons from Northern Ireland MPs on the fallout of the Commission's Article 16 move.

Responding to Claire Hanna (SDLP) he said: "I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that it was most regrettable that the EU should seem to cast doubt on the Good Friday agreement and the principles of the peace process by seeming to call for a border across the island of Ireland. I can tell her that we will work to ensure that there are no such borders—we will respect the peace process—and, indeed, no barriers down the Irish sea, and that the principle of unfettered access across all parts of our United Kingdom is upheld.

Replying to Ian Paisley Jnr. (DUP) he made specific reference to the controversial Article:

"I utterly share the hon. Gentleman's frustration about the way in which the EU, particularly the EU Commission, temporarily seemed to use the protocol in such a way as to impose a border, contrary to the spirit of the Good Friday agreement—contrary to the letter of the Good Friday agreement. We will do everything we need to do, whether legislatively or indeed by invoking article 16 of the protocol, to ensure that there is no barrier down the Irish sea and that the hon. Gentleman's business constituents, some of whom I know very well and admire very much, can continue to do business, unfettered, between Northern Ireland and the rest of this country."

DUP Statement on Protocol, 2 February 2021

On 2 February the DUP issued a comprehensive Statement – 'Free us from Protocol' – directed at the London Government, but also at

Dublin and Brussels, and attempting to unite unionism to campaign against the Protocol:

We have indicated to the Government that both the actions of the EU on Friday and the damage being inflicted on our East –West links within the United Kingdom cannot be sustained if Northern Ireland’s political and economic links to the rest of the United Kingdom are to be maintained and respected in all their parts. The Protocol has upset the balance of relationships flowing from the Belfast Agreement that many others claimed were unalterable.

The DUP indicated that it will pursue five key actions:

We will work with other Unionists to send a united message to our Government, to the European Commission and the Dublin Government that Northern Ireland must be freed from the Protocol and its problems.

The Protocol was passed by the Westminster Parliament and not at Stormont. Our elected representatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly, while careful not to act in a way that would harm the people of Northern Ireland at this time of public health and economic crisis, will actively oppose at every opportunity any negative measures, laws or bills that continue to flow from the Protocol and which undermine Northern Ireland’s place in the UK internal market. We will work in common purpose with all those other MLAs who are prepared to support us. Collectively unionism can make a difference.

Our Ministers, Members of the Commons and the Lords will actively work to press

the Government and hold it to account in support of Northern Ireland’s place in the internal UK market as well as building support to free us from the Protocol and its problems.

We are shortly launching an e-petition at Parliament calling on the UK Government to use all powers at its disposal to immediately remove any barriers to unfettered trade within the United Kingdom. We are asking all citizens concerned about these issues to show the Government the strength of feeling by signing the "Trigger Article 16 " online e-petition.

We have indicated to our own Government that they now need to act but as the largest unionist party at Stormont we also intend to send a strong signal to the Government of the Republic of Ireland that North-South relationships are also impacted by the implementation of a Protocol which they supported. Our members cannot and will not continue to act as though relationships are normal.

The DUP Petition calling on the UK Government to trigger a mechanism to override the Protocol has passed 140, 000 signatures, meaning that it will be debated in the Westminster Hall petition programme, though no date can be set due to COVID-19 restrictions. Arlene Foster commented that the scale of support was a clear demonstration to the parties supporting the Protocol that it is flawed and must be replaced.

Arlene Foster Article - The Telegraph (London) 3 February 2021

The DUP leader, Arlene Foster, set out to win support for her party’s position by contributing an article to the COMMENT section of The

Telegraph on 3 February – ‘Sticking Plasters will not fix the fundamental flaws in the Northern Ireland Protocol’.

In both the House of Commons and during a telephone call with us on Wednesday, the Prime Minister committed to protect the UK internal market by all legislative means necessary including triggering Article 16. He must now back up those words with tangible actions that protect the integrity of the whole of the United Kingdom.

The Northern Ireland Protocol has not worked, cannot work and in light of our proposals to the Government, needs to be replaced.

Indeed, across Northern Ireland there is growing anger at the current arrangements. The delicate political balance and relationships in Northern Ireland have been damaged and disturbed by the Protocol. The Northern Ireland Protocol has ruptured the United Kingdom internal market in order to give armour-plated protection to the single market of the European Union.

We have indicated to the Government that both the actions of the EU last Friday, and the damage being inflicted on our East–West links within the United Kingdom, cannot continue if Northern Ireland’s political and economic links to the rest of the United Kingdom are to be maintained and respected in all their parts. The Protocol has upset the balance of relationships flowing from the Belfast Agreement that many others claimed were unalterable. The Government needs to be bold and be prepared to act to bring about outcomes that underpin Northern Ireland’s full place in the most important internal market for us – that of the United Kingdom.

Section Two: The Evolving Debate

Economic and Trade Headlines

The new regulatory and customs arrangements entering into force from 1 January have created crisis situations for significant economic and trade sectors. Irish truckers complained to Government that “Brexit checks will bring trade to a standstill and threaten the economy.” Their UK counterparts were addressing the same concerns to Westminster. Businesses engaged in cross-border trade pointed to the dislocation and costs arising from burdensome form-filling and inspections and holdups at customs posts.

The City of London has been an early loser, with the Governor of the Bank of England, Andrew Bailey arguing that the EU “is poised to lock Britain out of its vast banking market”. London has been replaced by Amsterdam as the largest financial trading centre in Europe. It has been reported that London has lost 2,500 jobs and as much as €170 billion in assets to Amsterdam, Dublin, Frankfurt and Paris. The Financial Services Commissioner, Mairead McGuinness, has commented that jobs and investment are likely to continue to leave the City of London for the EU due to Brexit.

The Fishing and Seafood sector in the UK, Ireland and the northern EU countries has complained about changes arising from the specific EU-UK agreement on fishing and processing. The Irish Government has voiced unhappiness about disproportionate losses of fish quotas which threaten fishing communities. Seafood lorries from Scotland and Devon have descended on the Houses of Parliament protesting against Brexit red tape.

The January 2021 edition of the Irish Purchasing Managers Index, published by AIB, saw a reversal of the strong growth achieved in the later months of last year. “This decline

was not unexpected...with new post-Brexit UK trade regulations and disruptions an additional headwind for the manufacturing sector.”

The application of the Northern Ireland Protocol has added significantly to the general trade difficulties and has produced the communal and political fallout addressed in this Brief.

As the days and weeks went by it became clear that early freight problems were reducing, with some flows returning to the same levels as last year. Freight routes have changed with a significant increase in direct sea connections between Ireland and continental destinations thus avoiding difficulties on the traditional land bridge through the UK. While many commentators continue to predict negative outcomes of Brexit there are others arguing that opportunities are available with companies relocating or setting up subsidiaries on either side of the new borders. And, the Financial Times comments, there is one really big growth market – bureaucracy.

Northern Ireland Opinion Poll, 22-25 January 2021

The latest Belfast Telegraph Opinion Poll on political party support (22-25 January) shows a 4 per cent fall in support for the DUP and a significant 4 per cent increase in support for Jim Allister’s Traditional Ulster Voice (TUV). Alliance Party support increased by 2 per cent.

DUP 19% (-4); Sinn Fein 24% (-); UUP 12% (-); SDLP 13% (-); Alliance 18% (+2); TUV 10% (+4); Green 2% (-1); PBP 1% (-1); Others 1%.

Communal Tensions

Checks on animal and food products at Belfast and Larne ports were suddenly suspended on 1 February because of concerns for staff safety. The NI Department of Agriculture were

in consultation with the police authorities concerning reports of graffiti of a threatening nature and what was described as “menacing behaviour” towards staff at the two ports. Agriculture Minister Edwin Poots said he had taken the decision to withdraw staff following discussions with unions and that he was not convinced that the PSNI had a full understanding of the risk .

Physical checks were resumed a week later following a full threat assessment by the PSNI which concluded that there was no evidence of “credible threats” to the port staff. The police findings led to questions from local Sinn Fein and SDLP MLAs “around how and why the staffs were withdrawn in the first place and who made the decision.” It was argued that the workers were “used as pawns in a very, very cruel game.”

The PSNI became the subject of serious cross-community confrontation in the light of two events in Belfast. In an incident in East Belfast officers did not make any arrests when a large crowd of masked men congregated in an apparent loyalist paramilitary show of strength. The police approach was defended as avoiding a potentially dangerous situation by allowing the loyalist group to move away peacefully. Then, police intervened citing concerns over potential breaches of COVID-19 regulations at a wreath-laying ceremony at the site on the 29th anniversary of the massacre at the Sean Graham bookmakers on the Lower Ormeau Road. Video footage showed relatives and friends of those who died becoming visibly upset by the police intervention.

The PSNI Chief Constable, Simon Byrne, came under much pressure from both sides of the Belfast community, saying only that the force has been “under increased scrutiny for its policing of the coronavirus restrictions.” Two officers involved in the Sean Graham incident were later subjected to disciplinary procedures.

Section Three: Background Material and Further Reading

Background Material

GOV.UK Joint statement by the UK Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster Gove and European Commission Vice-President Sefcovic, 11 February 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-by-the-uk-chancellor-of-the-duchy-of-lancaster-gove-and-european-commission-vice-president-sefcovic>

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The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union



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