

All across continent, preparations for a chaotic Brexit



PARIS — One by one, European Union nations are spending millions, hiring thousands of workers and issuing emergency decrees to cope with the increasingly likely possibility that Britain will leave the bloc on March 29 without a plan.

A no-deal Brexit could shake up the rest of the continent in ways that many Europeans haven't yet fathomed, from snarled air traffic to paralyzed ports and millions of workers in legal limbo.

France is spending 50 million euros (\$57 million) to beef up security at airports and the Eurotunnel and hiring hundreds of extra customs officers.

Portugal is opening special airport lanes for British travelers, the nation's main source of tourists. The Netherlands is scouring for qualified veterinarians to carry out new checks on live imports. Germany is fast-tracking a debate on solving

bureaucratic problems if there is no Brexit deal.

Governments from Europe's Atlantic Coast to the Black Sea are preparing rules for British citizens to live and work in their countries once they no longer enjoy EU residency rights and hoping that Britain is doing the same for its citizens.

Britain, which would face by far the biggest disruption, has devoted thousands of civil servants and several billion pounds on measures to mitigate the worst effect — although officials can only speculate about what will actually happen on March 30 if Brexit occurs without a deal.

After the British Parliament overwhelmingly rejected British Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit divorce deal this past week, other governments are bracing for chaos, too.

"We strongly believe" Britain will leave with no exit deal, French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced Thursday, unveiling a raft of emergency measures to cope with that prospect. "Under these conditions, our responsibility ... is to ensure that our country is ready, that the interests of our citizens are preserved and defended."

The French government will build new infrastructure and hire new staff at airports and ports — and the tunnel beneath the English Channel. The company that operates the Eurotunnel says a quarter of all U.K.-EU trade passes through the tunnel, which could be a major chokepoint in a no-deal Brexit.

France's emergency decrees will temporarily let British companies transport goods in France and allow certain British insurance and other financial activities to continue in France despite Britain's loss of access to the EU financial market. The exceptional transfer of military equipment between the two countries will also be allowed.

In Berlin, German lawmakers debated a bill Thursday that aims to solve bureaucratic issues arising from Brexit.

"We want to keep the damage — and there will certainly be damage from Britain's departure — as small as possible," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Wednesday. "That's why we will of course do everything to find an orderly solution, but we are also prepared if there is no orderly solution."

Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa said Thursday that 80 percent of British tourists arrive at airports in Faro, the Algarve and Funchal in the Madeira Islands, where dedicated lines for them will help prevent delays.

Dutch authorities say they are hoping for the best and preparing for the worst. The customs service is hiring some 900 new staff. The food and animal welfare authority is scouring southern and eastern Europe for qualified vets to carry out checks on live imports.

The government has set up an online Brexit counter and checklist for Dutch companies doing business with Britain — some 35,000 of which have no experience of dealing with countries outside the EU single market.

Romanian leaders have sought to reassure the estimated half a million Romanians living in Britain that they won't be left in the lurch — but haven't provided specifics. Romania currently holds the EU's rotating presidency.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia are working on legislation to deal with the short-term rights of British citizens in a no-deal Brexit, while the Dutch will let British citizens living in the country remain for 15 months and offer them the chance to apply for residency permits.

In Britain, the government announced Thursday it's putting military reservists on standby for permanent service in the event the country leaves without a divorce deal. It's also recruiting hundreds of extra customs officers and border staff and has passed laws to help cross-border trade continue to flow, such as permits for long-distance truckers. Many businesses are taking things into their own hands and stockpiling goods.

Britain says EU citizens will be able to stay temporarily despite a no-deal Brexit.

A high-level EU official is now touring all the capitals of the 27 countries remaining in the bloc, to assess Brexit preparations and provide help where needed, EU Commission spokesman Margaritis Schinas said Thursday.

The EU has produced 88 notices on how specific sectors should deal with possible Brexit emergencies.

"We're not taking any chances," Mr. Schinas said.

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