

France putting EU at risk of hard Brexit for fishing rights Central Europe won't benefit from

France rejected Hungary and Poland's veto of the EU budget, but now plans to veto an EU deal with Britain.



On Dec. 6, when Europe's attention was focused on the risk of a Polish-Hungarian veto against the EU budget and recovery plan at the upcoming European Council of Dec. 10-11, Clément Beaune, the French Secretary of State for Europe, insisted in an interview that the remaining 25 member states should go ahead with a recovery plan without the two Central European countries.

"Our stance is clear. We will sacrifice neither the recovery plan nor the rule of law." Beaune said.

In the same interview, the French politician threatened the EU with a veto against any Brexit deal that would not sufficiently protect France's interests and the interests of its fishermen.

"If the deal is not good and does not respect our interests, especially for fishermen, France could, as any other member state, oppose it with a veto."

After 4.5 years of negotiations and several "last deadlines" to avoid a hard Brexit on Dec. 31, at the end of the current transition period, the European Parliament had indicated a deal would need to be struck on Sunday, Dec. 20, at the latest if it was to have time to approve it. No deal was in sight on Sunday evening, and ten days before the end of the transition period, we still did not know whether there is going to be a deal preserving free trade between the UK and the EU.



Fisherman, Nicolas Bishop, on the Boulogne sur Mer based trawler "Jeremy Florent II" prepares to raise fishing nets off the coast of northern France in Boulogne-sur-Mer, northern France, Thursday, Dec. 10, 2020. - AP Photo/Michel Spingler

The uncertainty alone is very damaging for the economy, and it is a massive failure for both the UK and the EU. The three main areas of divergence between the UK and the EU are:

- Fishing rights: Regaining control of British waters was a key argument of Brexiteers, and the UK is not ready to keep the current quota system in place in exchange for access to the Single Market, while the EU claims access of EU fishermen to UK waters should be guaranteed for ten years. Although some progress was made last week, positions remained far apart on Sunday evening.
- “Level playing field”: The EU wanted to be able to impose tariffs unilaterally if it considers in the future that the UK has gone too far away from its standards. Such a demand is motivated by the UK’s refusal to commit to adopting new EU standards in the future. Progress has been made on this subject, negotiators having agreed both the UK and the EU could impose tariffs, but only after having gone through an arbitration procedure.
- The Irish border: An agreement was reached on the implementation of last year’s Withdrawal Agreement after the UK threatened to vote in a new law that would allow its government to violate the Irish backstop clause of this international treaty if required in the future. The UK argues that it may need to so for the sake of territorial unity between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

On Sunday evening, fishing rights remained the main obstacle to an agreement being finalized. However, France still did not seem ready to back down on its demands, which are totally unacceptable from a British perspective. While fishing is a very tiny part of the economy on both sides of the Channel (far below 1 percent of GDP), the EU has made an agreement on fishing a precondition for a free trade agreement.

On Dec. 13, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had warned that the issue of fishing was putting at risk the prospect of a post-Brexit trade deal.

According to *The Telegraph*, President Emmanuel Macron expects Prime Minister

Boris Johnson to cave in and accept the EU's conditions after the Jan. 1 deadline because the troubles caused by a hard Brexit will be hugely unpopular. Whether or not this is a 'massive miscalculation' as *The Telegraph* claims, it is a dangerous game for the whole EU and something France ought to discuss with other EU countries first.



Emmanuel Macron reportedly believes that the UK will cave and give in to France's demands on fishing rights to avoid a hard Brexit. -AP Images

It is worth noting that a likely reason why the implementation of the Irish backstop had to be renegotiated with the British was that President Macron once talked at a press conference of the Irish "backstop" as a tool that would be used in future trade negotiations to force the UK to keep its waters open.

In 2017, Macron overtly warned that he wanted the EU to have a very tough approach in trade negotiations with the UK. Indeed, Macron then explained, a good deal for the UK "will be too big an incentive for others to leave".

"People were lied to, and their choice is impossible to implement," Macron also said in 2019.

France's punitive and selfish approach to Brexit negotiations is thus jeopardizing profits made by the whole EU in its trade with the UK. The EU-27's trade surplus with the UK was almost €90 billion in 2019, so the EU as a whole has more to lose than the UK in case no trade agreement is finalized at the end of the transition period.

Although Germany is by far the biggest trade partner for most Central European countries, the UK is important too. It is, for example, Poland's second-largest export market with a 7 percent share, and Poland has a trade surplus with the UK in both goods and services. Central European countries also have an interest in a deal being struck between the UK and the EU to guarantee the future status of their nationals working in significant numbers in the UK.

With the recession already caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the last thing Europeans needed this year was the ongoing uncertainty over future trade

relations with the UK. A hard Brexit on Dec. 31 due to Macron focusing on French interests and his will to deter others from exiting the bloc would be even worse.

Source:

<https://rmx.news/article/commentary/france-putting-the-eu-at-risk-of-hard-brexif-or-fishing-rights-central-europe-wont-benefit-from>

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