

Last weekend, Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab unexpectedly flew to Brussels and held an inconclusive meeting with Michel Barnier, the European Union's chief negotiator for Brexit. The two officials hit the rocks when discussing the Irish border backstop which is under scrutiny in the United Kingdom as British politicians say it would violate the Union's sovereignty.

In December 2017, the UK and EU agreed to maintain the free flow of goods without border checks between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Yet, the agreement they signed holds that in the case of a now more likely 'no deal Brexit', Northern Ireland would be required to align itself with EU regulations on cross-border trade, thus having a status separate from the UK. This option is to be categorically rejected by the UK, which might soon put forward a compromise with UK-wide provisions on customs to avoid checks from being placed on UK internal trade.

In a coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Prime Minister May seems to be gradually adopting a more intransigent approach to please her political allies, one of whom, Sammy Wilson, the DUP's Brexit spokesman, declared that a no deal Brexit was 'probably inevitable'.

Considering the general understanding that talks should be over by mid-November and that the backstop issue should be resolved by the end of this week, current developments raise the possibility of a 'no deal Brexit' and cast a shadow over a negotiating process already fraught with deep disagreements.

Sources:

The Guardian, Andrew Sparrow, 15 October 2018, "No-deal Brexit 'probably inevitable', says DUP's Sammy Wilson".

Reuters, Gabriela Baczynka, Alastair Macdonald, Elizabeth Piper, 14 October 2018, "Brexit talks stall before midweek EU Summit".

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