

# Triggering of Brexit intensifies national tensions in Europe

By Robert Stevens  
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The European Union (EU) and representatives of the continent's major powers reacted with undisguised hostility to Prime Minister Theresa May's triggering the Article 50 process for the UK to exit the EU.

The most significant expression of tensions came from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who responded--within hours of Brexit being triggered--by rejecting one of the main demands outlined by May in her Article 50 letter to European Council head, Donald Tusk.

May's six-page letter stated that the Conservative government believed it was "necessary to agree the terms of our future partnership alongside those of our withdrawal from the European Union."

Merkel is considered one of the more conciliatory voices regarding Brexit among Europe's ruling elite, given Germany's shared desire for austerity and free market liberalism from which both major imperialist powers have long benefited. But shared support for economic liberalism was trumped by the need to maintain a united front of the EU powers to prevent Brexit being a source of political contagion spurring on nationalist sentiment across the continent. Merkel warned, "The negotiations [on the UK's EU exit] must first clarify how we will disentangle our interlinked relationship. We must deal with many rights and obligations that have been linked to membership. Only then, later, can we talk about our future relationship."

Outgoing French President Francois Hollande issued a statement in agreement with Merkel. His office said, "The President indicated that the talks must at first be about the terms of withdrawal, dealing especially with citizens' rights and obligations resulting from the commitments made by the United Kingdom."

Speaking later Hollande said his assessment was that a final deal would be "economically painful" for

Britain.

The Thursday editions of several newspapers, which supported Britain remaining in the EU, summed up the crisis enveloping Britain's ruling circles. Philip Stephens of the *Financial Times*, in a piece titled, "Brussels takes back control of Brexit: All the power lies with Europe and Britain holds no cards in the coming negotiations," wrote:

"Until this week Brexit was about Britain. Now it is about Europe. A conversation largely focused on what sort of deal Britain would pitch for on its departure has become one about what the EU27 are willing to offer. To borrow a phrase [from the referendum campaign of the leave the EU wing], Brussels has taken back control."

Stephens added, "Those in Theresa May's government who have blithely imagined they can have the best of all worlds face a cold shower of reality."

Outlining Britain's "negotiating stance," May's letter warned that Europe's security would be jeopardised if a trade deal favourable to the UK was not agreed. She wrote, "Europe's security is more fragile today than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Weakening our cooperation for the prosperity and protection of our citizens would be a costly mistake."

The word security was referred to in the six-page letter no less than 12 times. The implied threat was that the UK would withdraw its substantial security and intelligence assets, as May followed the playbook written by US President Donald Trump, who has threatened to withdraw support for NATO if the EU powers did not increase their military spending.

The Brexit-supporting *Sun* celebrated May's stance, with the headline, "PM's Brexit threat to EU: Your money or your lives." Its editorial stated, "[T]he Prime Minister would be crazy not to use our peerless

anti-terror security services as a bargaining chip.”

This hostile opening gambit was made under conditions in which the US-led NATO continues to encircle Russia with heavy UK involvement, threatening war with another nuclear power.

The European Parliament’s Brexit chief, Guy Verhofstadt, was asked if May’s letter constituted blackmail. He replied, “I think the security of our citizens is far too important to start a trade-off of one and the other.”

On Thursday, he told *Sky News* that he opposed the “threat” in May’s letter, adding, “You cannot use, or abuse, I should say, the security of citizens to have then a good deal on something else.”

May and the Brexit faction of the ruling elite trumpeted last year’s referendum vote to leave as the springboard for the UK to “get out of Europe and into the world.” A newly liberated “global Britain” would be free to sign unlimited trade deals with countries and trading blocs internationally.

Verhofstadt was blunt in warning that the EU would prevent this while the scheduled two years of EU/UK talks were in progress. “We make very clear that we will never accept that behind our back the UK is starting trade negotiations with other countries before the withdrawal. The same goes for all member states of the EU who could be tempted to negotiate separate agreements with the UK,” he warned.

Not a single placatory statement on Brexit has been made by any senior EU figure. On every issue, the EU is taking the hardest line possible. The EU insists that no talks over trade will even be broached until the rights of EU citizens living in Britain and those of British citizens living in EU countries have been resolved. Verhofstadt also aligned himself with the Irish nationalist parties Sinn Fein, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, insisting, “We will never accept a hard border again between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic [which remains an EU member].”

On Wednesday evening, European Parliament President Antonio Tajani told BBC’s *Newsnight* that nothing would be discussed in the EU/UK negotiations before the issue of how much the UK must pay in a “divorce settlement” was agreed. Figures of anything up to £60 billion have been estimated as a payment for the UK’s share of EU liabilities, minus the UK’s share of EU assets. Tanjani said he did not know how much

the bill would be, “but I think billions and billions of euros.”

On the BBC’s *Today* radio programme, Manfred Weber, the chair of the largest grouping in the European Parliament--the right-wing European Peoples Party--referred to the UK as a non-European power to be treated in a hostile manner. “I have not the Russians’ interests in mind. I have not the Americans’ interests in mind. I have only these in mind who elected me.” He added, “I can give you a clear example for this--I don’t care anymore about the City of London’s interests. I will care about the interests of Amsterdam, Dublin and Frankfurt and Paris. That is what I have to do. These negotiations will be very tough.”

On the day May’s letter was delivered to Tusk, the EU competition commission blocked a long-planned £21 billion merger of the London Stock exchange with the Deutsche Börse. EU competition regulator Margrethe Vestager declared that the deal would create a “de facto monopoly” in “fixed income instruments.”

On April 5, the European Parliament--which has veto powers over any final Brexit deal--is expected to vote in favour of a resolution stating that a trade deal with the UK cannot be finalised until after its withdrawal from the EU. The resolution stipulates that a three-year time limit is applied as a transitional period to reach an agreement following Britain’s expected withdrawal in 2019.

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