

# Guy Verhofstadt: Brexit will be delayed unless Britain makes further concessions to EU

[Peter Foster](#), EUROPE EDITOR

[Gordon Rayner](#), POLITICAL EDITOR 27 APRIL 2018 • 9:30PM

Brexit could be delayed for years unless Britain makes further concessions to the EU, the European Parliament's chief negotiator has suggested.

Writing in The Telegraph, **Guy Verhofstadt** urges Theresa May to sign up to a catch-all association agreement with Brussels, which Brexiteers warn would leave the UK as a "rule taker" from the EU.

He says it is time to abandon "ideology" and take a more "pragmatic" approach.

Piling the pressure on Mrs May to accept an agreement that Leave campaigners fear will amount to the UK ending up as a "vassal state" of the EU, he adds: "The time for wishful thinking and kicking the can down the road is fast coming to an end".

The Telegraph understands that Mr Verhofstadt's suggestion has also been endorsed by the UK's chief negotiator Ollie Robbins who introduced the idea at a Cabinet meeting this week only to be rebuked by the Leave-supporting Environment Secretary Michael Gove.

An association agreement - which is usually signed with countries that want to join the EU - would provide an umbrella treaty to link trade, security and other broader aspects of the relationship, says Mr Verhofstadt, but similar agreements signed with other countries suggest the UK would be forced to swallow large chunks of future EU laws.

**Brexiteers regard association agreements as "second-tier EU membership", and suggested Britain would be better walking away without a deal than accepting Mr Verhofstadt's proposal.**

Mr Verhofstadt warns against a Swiss-style arrangement with the EU, which involves scores of individual treaties ranging from trade and customs to aviation and security.

"Opting for the 'Swiss route' would almost certainly lead to an extension of the transition agreement beyond 2020, whereas an association agreement could feasibly be signed provisionally at the end of the transition period, to be ratified later," he writes.

In contrast, Mr Verhofstadt says it would be feasible to sign an association agreement by the end of the transition period, to be ratified later.

It comes just days before a crunch meeting of the Brexit Cabinet committee at which ministers are expected to agree on a single strategy for Britain's future customs arrangement with the EU.

**Mrs May** is under intense pressure from ministers to abandon her favoured option of a customs partnership with Europe, which would involve Britain collecting tariffs at the Irish border on behalf of the EU, and instead opt for a “maximum facilitation” model relying on technology and trusted trader status.

Sources close to Brexiteer Cabinet ministers said Britain would have to be subject to European Union rules until at least 2023 if Mrs May opts for a customs partnership because of the length of time needed to get tariff collection systems in place.

The source added that opting for the customs partnership would leave the UK subject to rulings of the European Court of Justice and would effectively allow EU customs inspectors to carry out “spot inspections anywhere in the UK”.

Whitehall sources suggested that David Davis, the Brexit Secretary, could announce this weekend that the customs partnership option has been dropped.

Mr Verhofstadt, who speaks almost daily with Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief Brexit negotiator, travelled to London last month to meet Mrs May and Brexit cabinet ministers in a bid to sell the idea of an Association Agreement but received a mixed reception for the idea.

Brexiteers warned that such a one-stop-shop agreement would lead to “Brexit in name only”, trapping Britain in the EU’s suffocating regulatory embrace and removing the possibility of exerting the UK’s competitive advantage post-Brexit.

**Jacob Rees-Mogg, leader of the 60-strong European Research Group of Eurosceptic Tory MPs, said: “This is not my vision of the relationship the UK will have with the EU. It sounds like second-tier EU membership and therefore is unattractive.**

**“We want to be a third country like Canada, Australia or the US, not a country that is continuing regulatory association with the EU and is bound into specific control structures.”**

**Peter Bone MP, a Conservative member of the Leave Means Leave campaign, said: “An association agreement is basically EU Mark II. You would end up in a situation where the European Court of Justice would still be deciding legal disputes.**

**“We are getting very close to a situation where MPs like me will say ‘this is not coming out, so let’s keep the £39 billion Brexit bill money’.”**

David Jones, a former Brexit minister, said: **“Guy Verhofstadt is an arch federalist so I am suspicious of this. Beware Greeks bearing gifts, as the saying goes. Association agreements are normally for countries looking to join the EU, not ones that are leaving it.”**

Mr Verhofstadt argues that an association agreement does not necessarily have to be designed for countries moving towards closer union with EU.

Instead, he said such Agreements were like “a box into which we can place different areas of cooperation”, from trade, foreign and security policy, with a “deep and comprehensive free trade area” at its heart.

Mr Verhofstadt’s intervention comes as Brussels continues to pile pressure on Mrs May to shift her position on membership of the customs union - or accept the consequences of limited market access and an Irish ‘backstop’ arrangement that puts a border in the Irish Sea.

He pushed back on recent suggestions by Mr Davis that resolving the Irish border question could be postponed until October, warning this would be “would be far too late” if - as Mr Davis desires - the UK wants a meaningful deal on the future relationship.

Frustration is now building in the EU at the failure of the UK to produce what Mr Verhofstadt called a “credible proposal” on the Irish issue after European member states dismissed both the options put forward by Mrs May in her Mansion House speech as unworkable.

The Telegraph understands that if new positions emerge, they will likely do so after the May 3 local elections and in the form of new papers on customs and Ireland in mid-May, if cabinet ministers can reach agreement.

Simon Coveney, the Irish foreign minister, has said “serious questions” will be raised about the viability of a deal if there has been no progress by the time of the EU leaders’ summit on June 28-29.

Ministers are braced for a fresh defeat on Monday when peers are likely to vote to force an artificial timetable on the Government to win the approval of MPs and peers for their Brexit plans.

One Eurosceptic source said the proposal by Lord Hailsham was a “wrecking amendment” that was “clear in its intent even if it is not clear in its wording. It intends to delay, frustrate and reverse Brexit”.

It would allow MPs to tell the Government to re-negotiate its agreement with the EU if the “outcome of negotiations” has not been approved by the House of Commons by November 30.

**Eurosceptics fear that opponents of Brexit would use the opportunity to demand an extension of Article 50 keeping the UK in the EU.**