

Irish warn that Dublin has little scope for back down on Brexit



Leo Varadkar: 'Hard-line Brexiteers and some politicians in Northern Ireland will say "No" and will be angry at what they see today but just saying "No" and being angry is not enough'

Allies of Leo Varadkar have warned that Ireland's premier is heavily constrained by domestic political considerations as he resists UK pressure to weaken his stance on the Irish border.

Amid anxiety that the deepening schism over the frontier between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland could collapse the Brexit talks, political figures in Dublin said Mr Varadkar had no scope to reverse his demand for no border checks when the UK leaves the EU.

"There's no way he can resile from that, can't do it," said a senior government figure who is familiar with Mr Varadkar's thinking. It would be "game over" for his leadership if he turned back, the person said.

In office only since June, Mr Varadkar leads a minority government propped up by the biggest opposition party in a confidence-and-supply deal that expires at the end of this year.

As Irish politicians prepare for an election that could come within months, allies of the prime minister said he cannot be seen to change tack after securing legal measures to avoid a hard border in Brussels' draft UK withdrawal treaty.

A second Varadkar supporter said: "I think we're in very dangerous territory. A new taoiseach with a very recent elevation has really no room to manoeuvre here."

Theresa May has rejected the draft treaty from Brussels, insisting no UK prime minister could "ever" accept plans that would keep Northern Ireland under EU rules after Brexit, as have her Democratic Unionist allies.

But Mr Varadkar has called on Mrs May to produce her own proposals, saying it was incumbent on London to come up with fresh solutions. "Hard-line Brexiteers and some politicians in Northern Ireland will say 'No' and will be angry at what they see today but just saying 'No' and being angry is not enough," he told the Dublin parliament on Wednesday.

Although Brexiters in London have long made the calculation that fear of severe collateral damage to the Irish economy from a disorderly no-deal Brexit would lead Mr Varadkar to change course, observers in Dublin note cross-party support for his stance.

Stephen Donnelly, Brexit spokesman for the Fianna Fáil opposition, said Mrs May had agreed in December to "full alignment" between Northern Ireland and the EU if the preferred options of a close trading relationship with no border or technological solutions were not possible. "I can see no reason for the taoiseach or Ireland to capitulate."

Raising the stakes for Mr Varadkar is the fact that the UK talks in Brussels are set to culminate in October, the same month as he will seek agreement with Fianna Fáil on the budget for 2019 that will mark the end of their confidence-and-supply deal.

Mr Varadkar's tough stance on Brexit has played well with the Irish public, helping to push his poll ratings to levels not seen since for a taoiseach since the heyday of Bertie Ahern more than a decade ago. Allies say any change of course will weaken him politically in advance of polls. "My speculation would be that it would not be the best backdrop to fight an election on," said the second supporter.

Irish business is stepping up preparations for a hard Brexit. Simon McKeever, chief of the Irish Exporters' Association, said companies were looking beyond the political talks as they sought to minimise the damage from a disorderly UK exit. "Companies are beginning to really prepare how they're going to deal with the customs issues and export operational issues."