

Any UK obstruction of Irish hauliers could lead to ‘retaliation’

Businesses to press Government to disclose no-deal plans if Brexit deal is voted down



Any British obstruction of Irish hauliers travelling to and from [Europe](#) through the UK could lead to retaliatory restrictions on British traffic in Europe, transport and export industry sources have warned.

Concerns about risks to disruptions to the vital route for haulage companies have emerged in light of calls by Conservative former minister [Priti Patel](#) to use the “land bridge” as leverage to seek concessions on the [Brexit](#) deal.

The former international development minister was condemned in [Ireland](#) and UK for saying Britain could prevent the use of the country as a bridge between Ireland and Europe in a no-deal scenario in order to press the [Irish Government](#) to drop the contentious backstop. She later backtracked on her comments, saying that they were “taken out of context”.

The UK is party to an international agreement on transport through countries known as Common Transit convention, signed in 1987, which guarantees the unhindered transit of goods.

The agreement extends beyond [European Union](#) member states to countries such as [Switzerland](#), [Norway](#), [Turkey](#), [Macedonia](#) and [Serbia](#). Any deliberate delays imposed on goods passing through the UK for products originating from or destined for any of these countries and Ireland would amount to a breach of this convention. “If you stopped vehicles travelling through the land bridge, basically you are tearing up the convention, which would harm British hauliers who rely on that going to the Continent after Brexit,” said Seamus Leheny, policy manager with the [Freight Transport Association](#) in [Northern Ireland](#).

Dim view

Two-thirds of Irish exporters make use of the UK land bridge, connecting Ireland and Europe through British ports such as [Holyhead](#) and Dover, according to the [Irish Exporters Association](#). Some 53 per cent of Irish exports with the rest of the world (excluding the UK) in volume terms pass through the UK.

“Would the EU take a dim view of Britain taking unilateral action in relation to the land bridge? Would they retaliate? Maybe they could. It could mean that there is a slowdown of British freight getting on and off the island,” said Simon McKeever, chief executive of the Irish Exporters Association.

A bigger concern for importers and exporters, and transport companies shipping goods, is the delays arising from customs checks at points of entry into the UK should Theresa May’s Brexit deal be voted down in the House of Commons.

[Verona Murphy](#), president of the Irish Road Haulage Association, said she did not believe the UK would threaten to block off access for transiting goods but delays could make it seem that way.

“If there were to be a no-deal Brexit, the disruption it will cause may well look like the land bridge has been stopped there will be so much traffic backed up at the ports,” she said.

No-deal planning

Irish business groups are expected to heap significant pressure on Government this week to disclose further details of the no-deal contingency planning being developed privately should the EU-UK divorce deal be voted down by the UK parliament, as is widely expected given the level of opposition to the proposed agreement.

Government sources fear that any no-deal contingency plans released in Dublin could be used for political advantage by the rival Leave and Remain factions in London to press for further demands from [Brussels](#). The [Department of the Taoiseach](#) hosted a meeting of senior civil servants from various Government departments last Friday in what was the latest in a series of planning meetings around no-deal contingency work.

Companies in the pharmaceutical and food and drinks industry were planning to begin stockpiling products should Mrs May’s deal be voted down, said Mr McKeever.

“We are getting increasingly concerned about a no-deal situation and what happens then,” he said.

On Friday, Ireland’s EU commissioner for agriculture, [Phil Hogan](#), said the Government and State agencies “have to be planning ahead more intensively” for a potential no-deal scenario.

He cited the risks to the land bridge specifically and said major energy and other infrastructure projects may need to be brought forward.