

Top EU official admits tension shows need for 'day-to-day care' of post-Brexit ties



Tension over post-Brexit trade restrictions between Great Britain and Northern Ireland has been intensified by a quickly abandoned EU plan to restrict vaccine exports © REUTERS

Michael Peel and Sam Fleming in Brussels and Jasmine Cameron-Chileshe in London YESTERDAY

London and Brussels plan to set up a top-level emergency hotline in response to [escalating problems](#) over Northern Ireland in the weeks since the UK left the EU's single market, a top European Commission official has said.

Maros Sefcovic, the European bloc's point person on relations with the UK, insisted both sides wanted to de-escalate recent tension but admitted that the fallout from Brexit now needed "day-to-day care".

The friction was highlighted on Sunday when Boris Johnson, UK prime minister, twice declined to back the Brexit deal's [Northern Ireland protocol](#) when asked by the US broadcaster CBS whether he would stick to it.

Asked about the omission, a 10 Downing Street official pointed to a joint statement on Thursday in which the EU's Sefcovic and Michael Gove, his UK counterpart, committed to "proper implementation" of the protocol.

Speaking before Johnson's interview, Sefcovic said he and Gove had discussed the launch of an instant line of communication between them. The idea would be to address difficulties "at the moment they arise, before they become big, big issues", he said. London is understood to be open to the idea if it helps quickly resolve hitches on the ground.

### **We see there is a recipe to minimise — to the extent possible — the sometimes inevitable consequences of the UK leaving the EU**

Friction over new post-Brexit restrictions on the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland has been intensified by a quickly abandoned [EU plan](#) last month that would have impeded coronavirus vaccine imports to the province.

"What is very important in such a difficult situation is to have trust in your partner and to work together to resolve the issues," Sefcovic, a European

Commission vice-president, said in an interview.

"Until the dust settles down and the new [post-Brexit] system is introduced, I would say the relationship would really need day-to-day care."

Sefcovic said the disruption to trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK was unsurprising given the "massive, massive change" triggered by Brexit. But he said solutions to bottlenecks would only be possible once the UK fully implemented its obligations under the Northern Ireland protocol.

“We clearly want to de-escalate the situation,” said Sefcovic, who was speaking after his return to Brussels from three hours of talks in London with Gove, the UK Cabinet office minister. “We see there is a recipe to minimise — to the extent possible — the sometimes inevitable consequences of the UK leaving the EU.”

The Northern Ireland protocol requires goods flowing from Great Britain to Northern Ireland to follow EU customs rules, but the UK has demanded an “urgent reset” because of the strains this has placed on commerce. Among London’s demands is a series of 18-month extensions to grace periods to give businesses more time to adapt to new rules.

Sefcovic said there was “of course enormous will to help” on the EU side, but it was first necessary to see how the existing arrangements were being implemented on the ground. “I think that’s clearly the prerequisite, without which it’s very difficult to move any further,” he added.

Sefcovic told Gove in a letter this week that the UK was failing to meet various obligations under the protocol. These included the full implementation of controls at border control posts, although Sefcovic said he believed these were teething problems that could be swiftly addressed.

The commission plans in the coming week to talk to businesses in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland about how the protocol is working.

“We are operating under this new system [for] only six weeks, and I think that we see from both sides that this was a massive change,” Sefcovic said. “Some of the things we could foresee, some of them I think are popping up right now.”

Sefcovic insisted his talks with Gove had been conducted in a “very positive atmosphere”. [Micheál Martin, the Irish prime minister](#), has urged both the UK and parts of the EU to “cool it” and “dial down” rhetoric over Northern Ireland, in comments that provoked irritation in some EU capitals.

“I’m absolutely convinced that the protocol is the solution and not the problem,” Sefcovic said, “The protocol is the only way we can make sure that we have peace and stability on the island of Ireland [and] that we avoid a hard border.”

Sefcovic said he raised concerns with Gove about the UK’s refusal to give full diplomatic privileges to the EU ambassador to London and his mission. He further complained about a British decision to charge higher visa fees for nationals of five EU member states than the other 22.

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