Hard Brexit faction in May's party demands clean break from EU

By Elizabeth Piper and Andrew MacAskill, Reuters

More than 60 Conservative lawmakers have written to Theresa May demanding a quick, clean break from the European Union, adding pressure on the prime minister before her ministers meet to decide Britain's negotiating position.

Members of the hard-line European Research Group, a faction in her Conservative Party, wrote the letter days ago and have been adding signatures to bolster demands for Britain to toughen its position in talks to unravel more than 40 years of union. The letter adds to an increasingly divisive and angry debate over Britain's future relationship with the EU. Anti-EU campaigners are concerned that those calling for the closest possible ties will force a Brexit in name only. "It's to strengthen the government's position, because the EU will read the letter," Andrew Bridgen, a Conservative lawmaker and member of the ERG, told Reuters.

Pro-EU and pro-Brexit campaigners often send letters to May to air their views. But the timing of this letter - circulated widely, and which Bridgen has confirmed - is no surprise. May will meet her top ministers at her country residence, Chequers, on Thursday. They will try to come up with a final version of her government's approach to possibly the most difficult phase of the negotiations - settling on a transition phase and final agreement.

The group of 62 lawmakers demanded a tougher approach in a number of areas, including "full regulatory autonomy" outside the EU and the ability to start negotiating trade deals "immediately". They represent less than a fifth of the 316 Conservative members of parliament, but after May lost her parliamentary majority in a snap election last year, she cannot afford to alienate them, and she has been wary of setting out too many details of the government's negotiating position.

The EU wants May to clarify how she sees Britain's future relationship with the bloc. It is pressing for a status-quo transition period, which Brexit campaigners fear will see Britain subject to new EU laws that could threaten the status of London's financial centre.

They want a veto over any news rules or regulations and the ability to change British laws without authorisation from Brussels from the moment the country formally leaves the EU on March 29 next year. The EU says Britain cannot undercut tax, labour or other standards and must ensure a level playing field during a transition.

Some Brexit campaigners also want to make sure that a future free-trade agreement is locked in while Britain continues to pay the EU during the transition phase. The debate will come to a head on Thursday when May will host senior ministers to try to broker an agreement. She is then expected to set out her plans in a speech in the next couple of weeks, before formal trade talks begin in March.
New British party inspired by Macron seeks to overturn Brexit

By Andrew MacAskill and Guy Faulconbridge, Reuters

A new British party inspired by French President Emmanuel Macron's movement launched a campaign on Monday to thwart Brexit by convincing lawmakers to block any EU withdrawal deal Prime Minister Theresa May can strike.

With just over 13 months left until Britain is due to leave the EU, opponents of Brexit are exploring ways to stop what they call Britain's biggest mistake since World War Two. The Renew party, founded last year after Macron's En Marche! movement propelled him to power, said it would target pro-Brexit lawmakers in constituencies with high levels of support for EU membership.

"We intend to be tough on Brexit and tough on the causes of Brexit," said James Torrance, the party's head of strategy. "We'll pressure MPs to consider the national interest and put Remain back on the table in a vote on the final EU deal."

The party, founded by an accountant, a former journalist and a consultant, plans to contest seats in May local elections and all 650 parliamentary seats if there is a national election. In the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum, 51.9 percent, or 17.4 million people, voted to leave the EU while 48.1 percent, or 16.1 million, voted to stay. Blocking any withdrawal deal that May brings back from Brussels in October would probably sink her minority government and prompt a national election that could throw Britain's exit into doubt.

GOVERNMENT SPLIT

May's government and party is divided over Brexit. She campaigned for a "remain" vote in 2016, but now insists Britain will leave at 2300 GMT on March 29, 2019. She says there will be no rerun of the referendum. An ICM survey published last month showed 47 percent of voters favour having a final say on Brexit once the terms of the departure are known, while 34 percent oppose a rerun of the referendum.

But the survey showed just a two-percentage-point lead for remaining in the EU once the "don't knows" are excluded. Read more

A journalist reads literature produced by the Renew party at press conference in London, Britain, February 19. REUTERS/Peter Nicholl
Britain's May wins backing for EU security pact, timing unclear

By Thomas Escritt and Robin Emmott, Reuters

Prime Minister Theresa May made her case on Saturday for a new security treaty with the EU from next year, winning support from EU and U.S. officials who agreed the issue was too important to risk getting subsumed in broader Brexit negotiations.

In a speech to Western leaders and officials in Munich, May promised that London would continue to lead military missions and share intelligence if Brussels agreed to a pact “effective from 2019”, the year Britain is due to leave the bloc.

May's government is using a series of speeches to set out its vision for Britain outside the European Union. But the loudest applause during her appearance came when the event's organiser, German diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger, said: "Things would be so much easier if you stayed."

But May was adamant: "We are leaving the EU and there is no question of a second referendum or going back, and I think that's important," she told the Munich Security Conference.

"The partnership that we need to create is one that offers UK and EU ways to combine our efforts to greatest effect where this is in our shared interest," May said of her security plan.

Britain is one of the top three users of data from European Union police agency Europol. But as it leaves the EU, there is a risk that it will be shut out of this cooperation, becoming more vulnerable to Islamist militants, officials say.

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Jean-Claude Juncker, the EU's chief executive, welcomed a "security alliance" with Britain, adding that the issue should be separated from the rest of the Brexit debate. Britain, along with France, is Europe's biggest military power and leads two European Union military missions while sending troops to Estonia under a NATO flag. With a host of issues still unresolved and infighting over Brexit dividing May's government just over a year before Britain is due to leave, security is one of London's biggest bargaining chips as it seeks a new deal with Brussels. Britain's interior minister last year told the EU it could "take our information with us" if it left the bloc without a deal on security. May emphasized she was committed to European security, warned against competition between Britain and the rest of Europe and said that both sides should do "whatever is most practical and pragmatic in ensuring our collective security." Juncker said security should not be conflated with "other questions relating to Brexit," also quashing any British hopes that a security treaty might be a way into a free-trade deal. "I wouldn't like to put security policy considerations with trade policy considerations in one hat. I understand why some would like to do that, but we don't want to," he said.

VEILED THREAT?
NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg also welcomed close security cooperation between Britain and the EU after Brexit, while Stoltenberg’s predecessor at the alliance, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, told Reuters May’s was a strong speech. "I think that is what we should aim for, but any treaty is very time-consuming. The timeline is unrealistic," Fogh Rasmussen said. A senior U.S. official said: "We know the goal, but I don't know if this is the right vehicle."
But May’s call to set aside "rigid institutional structures" to enable a quick agreement on security was less well received. "What she meant was not specified and sounded like a veiled threat," said EU lawmaker Marietje Schaake, a Dutch centrist. One senior EU official in Munich said that May would need to submit a formal negotiating paper to detail her ideas and then allow EU and British negotiators to move forward. Read more

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