

# Analysing statements on the Irish border is an exercise in futility

*Political scientist **Dr Anna Bailey** explains the futility of trying to analyse politicians' statements of intent on the Irish border. The EU is compelled to face both ways at the same time on the border issue. Despite the public displays of camaraderie between the EU and Ireland, it is impossible to know whether the EU will U-turn on the backstop in the final reckoning.*

Various European actors have made plenty of headlines with their statements on the Irish border in the past fortnight. So, after careful analysis of their words, what have we learnt? Virtually nothing.

In the present climate it is pretty much impossible to regard as sincere any public pronouncement on Brexit, be it from a representative of the EU institutions, or members of the political establishments of the UK or EU27. Nothing that is said can be assumed to be a genuine statement of intent. Rather, utterances are part of a complex game of bluff and double bluff, intended to try and spook opponents, sway public opinion, or sound out others' intentions.

The problem is that everyone concerned knows it. And so Brexit reportage has descended into a succession of farcical performances of The Emperor's New Clothes. Journalists are no doubt well aware that they are being used as propaganda vehicles by all sides, to transmit messages that no one takes at face value. But they have no choice to report them nonetheless, because everyone else is reporting them, and they can't be the one not to cover today's headline 'news'.

The European Commission's chief spokesman Margaritis Schinas

enjoyed a starring role in recent shenanigans, when he got the chance to deliver a provocative line on the Irish border: 'If you'd like to push me and speculate on what might happen in a no-deal scenario in Ireland, I think it's pretty obvious – you will have a hard border.'

The anti-Brexit press were quick to jump on these words. 'No-deal Brexit would mean hard Irish border, EU confirms', announced the *Guardian*. 'Brexit setback for Theresa May as EU confirms it would enforce hard Irish border in event of no-deal', echoed the *Independent*. Note the use of the verb 'confirm' in both these headlines, as if this were the official announcement of EU policy written in tablets of stone, rather than a clumsy attempt at Project Fear Irish Edition aimed at UK politicians.

Unfortunately for the EU, it is compelled for diplomatic reasons to face both ways at the same time on the Irish border issue. The EU is terrified of being painted as the bad guy that forces Ireland to construct a hard border when the latter has said all along that it won't. Thus, the next day, Michel Barnier was quick to quash talk of an EU-imposed hard border, stating that in the event of no-deal, 'we will have to find an operational way of carrying out checks and controls without putting back in place a border.' He added, 'my team have worked hard to study how controls can be made paperless or decentralised, which will be useful in all circumstances.' Needless to say, a headline 'EU confirms no-deal would *not* mean hard Irish border' was nowhere to be found in the *Guardian* or the *Independent*.

Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar took this game of doublespeak to a new level a couple of days later, when he stated that a hard border resulting from no-deal could 'involve people in uniform... possibly a police presence, or an army presence to back it up'. He was rewarded with the 'Troops could return to Irish border' headlines that he was clearly looking for. A few hours later, an Irish government spokesman was dispatched to

‘clarify’ that the Irish would not put troops on the border after all: ‘He [Varadkar] was not referring to Irish personnel and the Irish government has no plans to deploy infrastructure or personnel at the border.’ Which begs the question, which troops was he referring to? UK troops? EU troops?

Further instalments of pointless rhetoric quickly followed. Last week, Donald Tusk, Jean Claude Juncker, Michel Barnier and Leo Varadkar all chanted in unison that, ‘The backstop is part of the Withdrawal Agreement, and the Withdrawal Agreement is not open for renegotiation.’ This was backed up by a chummy press conference between Tusk and Varadkar this Wednesday together with a joint statement from Juncker and Varadkar, although the PR message of EU-Irish unity was somewhat drowned out by the boys’ inability to resist bolstering their camaraderie with barbed comments about Brexiteers’ “special place in hell”.

Yet this slick choreographed performance is of little help in predicting what the EU will actually do in the final reckoning. No amount of staunch rhetoric can disguise the fact that the EU faces a fundamental conflict: between an invisible Irish border, and securing the borders of its Single Market. In response to the EU chorus of ‘no renegotiation’, the Guido Fawkes website pointed out that a similar EU united front – that of ‘no Greek bailout’ in 2010 – concluded with the EU caving in. And that was despite the fact that bailouts are expressly prohibited by the Maastricht Treaty.

If the EU can breach its own treaties to perform a U-turn, there is every possibility it could U-turn on the backstop. Maybe it will, maybe it won’t – who knows. Most likely the EU’s powerbrokers haven’t even reached agreement among themselves yet. The stakes are so high, the issues so complex, and various actors’ incentives so mixed, that there is bound to be a multiplicity of views behind the scenes. It all depends who eventually prevails.

As 29 March creeps ever closer and the situation remains just as uncertain as ever, there is an understandable temptation to analyse every word uttered by politicians and officials, to try and predict how the Brexit endgame will play out. Unfortunately, these utterances are not intended to inform, but to win a negotiating battle. Far from providing any insight, analysing them is nothing but an exercise in futility.