

EU ministers resist big Brexit rethink as UK speculation of 'rejoining' grows

By Benjamin Fox, EU Observer

London, 27 May 2026 10:28

EU officials were guarded on the prospect of closer relations with the UK amid growing speculation that London wants to reverse much of the Brexit process.

Relations with the UK were high on the agenda at a meeting of the EU's general affairs council in Brussels on Tuesday (25 May) and, ahead of the meeting, Ireland's foreign minister Helen McEntee told reporters that concluding EU-UK negotiations on agrifood standards and emission trading schemes were a top priority.

But other top officials were giving little away. Marilena Raouna, Cyprus' deputy minister for European affairs, told reporters after the meeting on Tuesday that "tangible progress" had been made during her government's six-month EU council presidency, pointing to the conclusion of an agreement on Gibraltar and the start of talks on electricity trading.

She added that "ministers shared a clear willingness to continue strengthening relationship in a pragmatic spirit."

British prime minister Keir Starmer promised a 'reset' of UK-EU relations after winning the 2024 elections and has since brought the UK back into the Erasmus student exchange programme as well as parts of the EU's cohesion policy to support the bloc's poorest regions. His ministers have also opened talks with EU officials on electricity trading and an agreement on phytosanitary standards that would ease trade in agricultural goods.

But with Starmer under heavy pressure to resign following dismal results in local elections in May, and Labour slumping behind Nigel Farage's nationalist Reform party in opinion polls, Andy Burnham and Wes Streeting, the two most likely candidates to replace him as prime minister have both called for the UK to rejoin the EU, though without setting a timeline for this.

Starmer's government, for its part, has offered to join the single market, according to press reports, but has been rebuffed, for the moment, by the EU.

Also on Tuesday, the bloc's commissioner for startups, research and innovation, Ekaterina Zaharieva, told the Financial Times that the UK could join the EU's €4bn investment fund for start-ups.

For his part, democracy and rule of law commissioner Michael McGrath stuck to generalities, saying that the EU Commission "continues to work on translating the renewed bilateral agenda into concrete outcomes" based on "the full timely and faithful" implementation of the existing Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

Though there is relief among most EU governments at the Starmer government's wish for closer ties, few want to reopen the Trade and Cooperation Agreement struck with Boris Johnson in December 2020.

Instead, most want to take a piecemeal approach, focused on phytosanitary standards and UK participation, in return for a financial contribution, in the EU's SAFE defence procurement scheme.

"The UK clearly understands that Brexit has been one of the factors contributing to its economic difficulties," Bernd Lange, the chair of the European Parliament's international trade committee, told EUobserver. Pointing to the mutual desire for "closer alignment", he added that "my sense is that, in the long run, this could evolve into something resembling a Swiss-style model."