

May is the cruelest month

[June 19 was day one](#) of the Brexit negotiations. David Davis and Michel Barnier will be leading what is expected to be one of the most tantalising sets of negotiations in the history of European integration. Difficult decisions will have to be taken on a number of issues such as [the rights of EU citizens in the UK](#) and UK citizens in the EU, the [Irish border](#) and the future UK-EU trade relationship.

However, European leaders fear that Theresa May's government [might be too fragile](#) to negotiate viable terms on which to withdraw from the Union. This is a result of the decision of the UK Prime Minister to pull a 'Tsipras' and call a snap election. She was hoping to capitalise on the shambolic state of the opposition. Indeed, two months ago, [when she called the election](#), the polls were showing a twenty point lead. They were suggesting a landslide that would have allowed May to single-handedly make all the major decisions concerning Brexit. [A catastrophic campaign](#), however, led to an [unexpected result](#) proving that calling a snap election was a monumental act of political self-harm.

More importantly, the Conservative Party lost their majority in the House of Commons. This led them to seek the support of the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland. According to the reports, [the 'confidence and supply arrangement' will be concluded](#) early next week.

So, instead of getting a significant increase in their majority as the Conservatives were hoping for, there is now a 'hung Parliament'. This has led a number of commentators to [speculate](#) that perhaps a 'soft Brexit' which would entail the remaining of the UK in the single market and perhaps in the customs union is back on cards.

Indeed, if the Conservative party pays closer attention to the demands of Northern Ireland, this might be the case. The reason being, that a hard territorial border with the Republic of Ireland would be catastrophic for the economy of the island and poisonous for the fragile peace process. At the same time, [the 13 new Scottish Conservative MPs and their leader Ruth Davidson may also push towards this direction](#). A 'soft Brexit' may further reduce the popular demand for a second Scottish independence referendum. So, theoretically speaking at least, a 'soft Brexit' could accommodate the concerns of Scotland and Northern Ireland that voted to remain in the EU and parts of their political elites that have a pivotal role in the current government.

This is one of the reasons why Chancellor Philip Hammond [argued](#) that the government should secure an agreement from the rest of the EU according to which the UK can remain a *de facto* member of Europe's single market and customs union at least for a transitional period. However, Hammond was not describing the UK negotiating position. [He was rather lobbying the government to adopt such strategy](#). He is fully aware that although there might not be a majority for a hard Brexit in the current Parliament, the 'die-hard' Brexiteers and their many back-bench allies are still there. They will fight against such transitional arrangement fearing that it might morph into something more permanent. At the end of the day, both the manifestos of the Conservative and

the Labour parties included a promise that the UK will be out of the single market and the customs union by the end of the Brexit process.

Be that as it may, at the moment, Theresa May looks anything but a Prime Minister who can offer 'strong and stable leadership'. She called a snap election in order to get a personal mandate to lead the UK out of the EU in accordance with her vision and she ended up in a far weaker position. She is in the unenviable position of having to appease on the one hand [the anti-gay rights and abortion DUP](#) and on the other, [the Scottish Conservative leader, who is gay and plans to marry her partner in the near future](#). She has to reach a mutually beneficial agreement with the EU without getting her party into turmoil over Europe again.

If only she and her government would admit publicly that [there is no deal that is worse than a 'no deal' situation](#). That would have been the first step towards educating the UK electorate that a successful Brexit process that would not threaten the fragile political and constitutional balance of the UK demands compromises. Anything other that could potentially mean that May might prove to be the cruellest month for the UK.

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