

Brexit realities break through Johnson's façade of unicorn promises

*Johnson's government has been consistently incompetent in its implementation of Brexit. The realities of being outside of the EU Single Market and Customs Union are beginning to break through Johnson's façade of unicorn promises, writes **John Ryan** (CESifo). The PM's Hard Deal Sunlit Uplands will reveal themselves as nothing but a feeding ground for Brexit unicorns, he argues.*

Effective 1 January 2021, the UK has left both the EU Single Market and Customs Union, and changes have come into effect in how the UK trades with the EU and in the customs, safety and regulatory checks required at the UK-EU border. The EU has begun treating the UK as a third country and implementing full controls on goods passing between the UK and the EU. Billions of pounds worth of trade with the European Union now face "[significant disruption](#)", according to Whitehall's spending watchdog, the National Audit Office (NAO).

Boris Johnson and his cabinet neglected preparations and instead created a façade of over-optimistic promises with the added intention of blaming any disruptions on their negotiating counterparts in the EU. This disregard for the need of certainty among UK businesses to prepare for the impact of new Brexit rules and regulations will result in detrimental costs for medium and small sized firms in particular.

The reluctance by Boris Johnson to tackle foreseeable challenges ahead of time and with guidance from experts for the simple reason of scoring short term political goals and placating opposing voices within his own Conservative party is also tragically playing out in the current COVID-19 crisis.



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As for Brexit, [the NAO report of 6 November 2020](#) highlighted key risks around government systems development, infrastructure, and resourcing – and from the business perspective – lack of industry and trader readiness. The report was critical of Boris Johnson's government for the inadequacy of these preparations and for its failure to foresee and respond to the predictable administrative consequences of Brexit. These individual criticisms are no doubt justified, but they should not obscure the larger political and psychological factors which always made it inconceivable that the government would approach its preparations for Brexit in a methodical and coherent fashion.

[The National Audit Office \(NAO\)](#) also highlighted that UK government departments have made progress towards implementing only a “minimum” operating capability by 1 January 2021 for trade of goods between the UK and EU. Establishing transit arrangements – which enable traders to move goods using a simplified process – “will be challenging to deliver in their entirety”. The situation for trading goods between mainland Britain and Northern Ireland is even more fraught.

“Implementing the Protocol is very high-risk due to the scale of the changes required; the limited time available; the dependence on ongoing negotiations; and the complexity of the arrangements. Delivery risk is also heightened by the need to integrate and manage changes across multiple projects and stakeholders...”

[Significant concerns have been expressed over the UK's preparedness for leaving the EU](#) by a unanimous report of the cross-party House of Commons' Brexit select committee which has called on the government to ensure there is a robust contingency plan in to cope with the fallout as it criticises the lack of an "overall state of readiness" for business and citizens.

[Nearly one year into Brexit](#) while being in the transition period the UK has already started losing competitiveness and market share globally. Now that Brexit takes place based on a Hard Deal between the UK and the EU, it will be much more difficult for the British government to avoid its share of the Brexit blame game.

[Johnson's government has been consistently incompetent](#) in its implementation of both viable COVID-19 and Brexit negotiation strategies. The ideological dogma of his weak and incompetent cabinet has thrust the UK into economic and political crisis. On Brexit the lack of understanding of the large asymmetry of power between the UK and the EU's 27 members has shown a lazy, uninformed, and arrogant attitude to the Brexit negotiations. With regards to COVID-19 death rates, [the UK has one of the worst records in Europe](#) and indeed the developed world. Acting on medical advice competently and timely could have saved tens of thousands of lives. [There was clearly waste, negligence and cronyism](#) which will need a public inquiry, but the government will not allow that to happen any time soon.

The last-minute Hard Brexit deal agreed just before Christmas is still open to attack by the European Research Group (ERG) once the details are further examined and negotiations continue with the EU. The ERG is likely to continue undermining and destroying the deal that has been struck in the final hours of the transition period. This group of out-of-touch imperialists and small-minded nationalists want a constant conflict with the EU and therefore debates over Brexit will go on. Brexit and the consequences which will come from it in 2021 onwards are the fault of the politicians who promoted and pursued it. [Boris Johnson](#) and Brexiters will be made to own their project and let us see the result in the next five years.

The Johnson government in its ignorance and recklessness has got the UK into a precarious situation which will become more evident in the coming weeks and months as the Brexit realities and his mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis unfold. Boris Johnson's Hard Deal Sunlit Uplands will reveal themselves as nothing but a feeding ground for Brexit unicorns.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.