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WORLD EUROPE

After Criticizing the EU for Years, Britain's Conservatives Extend an Olive Branch

U.K., European Union aim for reset at inaugural European political gathering



By [Laurence Norman](#) [Follow](#) in Prague and [Max Colchester](#) [Follow](#) in London

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After years of tension, the U.K. is adopting a new strategy toward its European Union neighbors: making nice.

In the years following the Brexit vote in 2016, tussling with the EU was seen as a rite of passage for any Conservative Party leader. But in recent weeks, new Prime Minister Liz Truss has led a shift that has taken the bloc, and many Conservatives, by surprise.

“We want our relationship with the EU to work,” U.K. Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said earlier this week at a Conservative Party conference in Birmingham, central England.

On Thursday, Ms. Truss is attending the inaugural meeting of the European Political Community in Prague. The U.K. is also resuming talks with the EU over a long-running disagreement on post-Brexit trading arrangements for Northern Ireland, and King Charles III has been told by the Foreign Office his first state visit should be to France, palace officials say.

Steve Baker, a Conservative lawmaker who led a hard-line Brexit group in Parliament and is now the U.K.'s Northern Ireland minister, even apologized for his past behavior in an effort to improve the prospects for a deal on the territory. "I and others did not always behave in a way which encouraged Ireland and the European Union to trust us," he said Sunday.

Behind the new approach is both economic and political reality. The U.K., which is heading toward a likely recession, wants to reassure investors that a trade war with the EU isn't in the cards. It also wants to soothe concerns in the White House, which has been critical of the U.K.'s threat to rip up a deal that imposed conditions such as a customs border between the British mainland and Northern Ireland. And the war in Ukraine has given greater impetus for European neighbors to show a united front against Russia.



It is unclear how long the warmer relations will last. European and British officials warn that the opportunity for a reset could easily slip away, with tensions over the Brexit deal still likely to be quick to emerge, analysts say.

It was only this summer, during the Conservative leadership campaign, that Ms. Truss questioned whether French President Emmanuel Macron was a friend or a foe and seemed to brush off his new European Political Community idea, which creates a platform for leaders to discuss common issues without the bureaucracy or rules of the EU. Mr. Macron responded by saying Britain was France's close friend "sometimes despite its leaders." The two met in New York after Ms. Truss took office on Sept. 6.

The two sides are still threatening each other with legal action, and officials say finding a fix for the politically contentious issue of Northern Ireland's post-Brexit trading

arrangements will be hugely complex, even if the political will exists.

Yet both are eager to avoid a deeper rift or a potentially costly trade war, with the conflict in Ukraine and its spillovers on European energy supplies and economies dominating the agenda.

Ms. Truss's decision to attend Thursday's gathering in Prague, which includes the EU's 27 members and 17 non-EU countries, including Ukraine but excluding Russia, was seen by European capitals as a critical signal of engagement, EU officials said. Thursday's gathering will be followed up with meetings every six months, Mr. Macron said. British officials had said they would be interested in hosting the event. The leaders agreed Thursday evening that Britain would host the event after meetings in Moldova and Spain, according to a senior EU official.

Over several weeks of discussions, British officials tiptoed around whether Ms. Truss would attend, seeking to ensure the event wouldn't be dominated by the EU and would include issues such as illegal migration, which the new government is eager to discuss. They even pushed—unsuccessfully—for a name change.



However, the key driver of Ms. Truss's decision to attend was Ukraine and the desire to show a united continental front, officials say.

“Europe is facing its biggest crisis since the Second World War. And we have faced it together with unity and resolve,” the British leader was due to say on Thursday, according to remarks released by her office. “We must continue to stand firm—to ensure that Ukraine wins this war, but also to deal with the strategic challenges that it has exposed.”

Ms. Truss's decision to join the meeting was welcomed in Brussels and Paris. For the EU and the Czechs, who will co-host the meeting, it lends the gathering non-EU heft and strengthens the message on the war. Britain has played a leading role in supplying military aid to Kyiv, bolstered its presence on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's eastern flank and coordinated sanctions and financial support for Ukraine with the EU as well as Washington.

"We share the same continent and we face the same challenges," European Council President Charles Michel said as he arrived at Thursday's meeting. "The fact that the 44 countries which were invited decided to participate is a first important signal."

In Prague, Ms. Truss had bilateral meetings with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Mr. Macron, the EU's two most powerful leaders. After meeting Mr. Macron, the U.K. and France put out a joint statement pledging to deepen their cooperation on Ukraine, nuclear energy and illegal migration. They announced a U.K.-France summit for 2023 "to take forward a renewed bilateral agenda."

Mr. Macron said at a press conference after the meeting that it had been "very good news" that Ms. Truss had come to Prague and that Britain was looking to be engaged in common initiatives with its European neighbors.

"I do hope that this is a new phase of our common relations, that this is the beginning of the day after," he said.

The real test, however, will come in the weeks ahead over negotiations on how the terms of the Brexit divorce deal should be applied in Northern Ireland. Some British ministers have suggested they are looking for a deal within weeks but officials in Brussels think a deal, if possible, could take months.

After Britain quit the EU, the Conservative government agreed to place a customs border within its own country, between Britain and the province of Northern Ireland, which is in the U.K. The aim was to avoid jeopardizing the 1998 Good Friday peace agreement by placing the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which is in the EU.

The British government has since tried to alter the treaty amid complaints from pro-U.K. groups in Northern Ireland that they felt cut off from the rest of the country. The Democratic Unionist Party is refusing to sit in the Northern Irish assembly until the matter

is resolved.

When serving as foreign secretary, Ms. Truss introduced a law that is currently being voted through Parliament that would allow the U.K. to unilaterally alter parts of the Brexit deal. The threat to rip up an international treaty has drawn criticism from the White House.

Write to Laurence Norman at laurence.norman@wsj.com and Max Colchester at max.colchester@wsj.com

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