Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Is a breakthrough in the UK-EU relations possible with a new prime minister?

A few weeks are certainly not enough to assess whether Rishi Sunak's new cabinet will manage to find a new approach in relations with the EU, or even whether it will choose to follow that path. But there are clear signals of rapprochement between London and Brussels. The time taken to congratulate Rishi Sunak elapsed very quickly. There were warm messages, but both sides are aware that they have to get down to real work as soon as possible.

"Working together is the only way to face common challenges... and bringing stability is key to overcoming them," was part of the congratulatory message from the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, to Prime Minister Sunak. The president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, said that "At a time of enormous challenges, Europe needs political and economic stability. Our core interests remain the same". German Chancellor Olaf Scholz congratulated Rishi Sunak after he became Britain's third prime minister this year, and vowed to continue working closely with London. "I look forward to our further cooperation and partnership in NATO and G7 as close friends," Scholz tweeted.

Congratulations were expected and welcomed as an introduction to a large scope of work where the UK and the EU have a common interest to cooperate. One issue, if not the most important, is support for Ukraine. This was the main topic of the telephone conversation between Prime Minister Sunak and Chancellor Scholz just three days after Sunak moved into 10 Downing Street. Sunak and Scholz have agreed on the need to continue to support Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor agreed on the need to continue supporting Ukraine and maintaining pressure on (Russian President Vladimir) Putin through robust sanctions, Sunak's Downing Street office said following the call between the two leaders.

Prime Minister Sunak and French President Emmanuel Macron met in the margins of the UN's COP27 climate summit in Egypt, with Mr. Sunak under pressure from days of bad headlines on the fate of migrants holed up in one UK detention center. On Monday November 7, Mr. Sunak vowed to take action on cross-Channel migrants after his first face-to-face meeting with the French President. Mr. Sunak has taken a much more positive tone towards Ms. Macron than his short-lived predecessor Liz Truss, who infamously refused to say whether the president was a friend or foe.

"It was great to meet President Macron to talk about not just tackling illegal migration but the range of other areas in which we want to cooperate closely with the French on," he told UK media. "I'm actually leaving this with renewed confidence and optimism that working together with our European partners, we can make a difference, grip this challenge of illegal migration and stop people coming illegally."

Some 40,000 people have crossed the Channel in small boats so far this year, with predictions that numbers could hit 50,000 or even 60,000 by the end of the year. This has caused a backlog of asylum claims and increased accommodation costs estimated by the UK government at £6.8 million a day.

Mr. Sunak insisted his beleaguered interior minister, Suella Braverman, was getting to grips with the crisis, while stressing that it lacked "one simple solution that's going to solve it overnight".

A larger breakthrough is on the horizon

Regarding the future relations of prime minister Sunak's cabinet with the EU, The Guardian reported the assessment of senior EU diplomats that the weakness of the British economy and chaotic end of the Truss government means the UK can no longer afford a trade war with the EU an outcome that remains on the cards if the British government pushes ahead with plans to unilaterally abandon the protocol.

Sunak begins with one big advantage: he is not Boris Johnson. "Who knows what we will get under Rishi, but BJ would have been terrible," said one diplomat after Johnson announced he would not be standing for the Conservative leadership.

EU diplomats are still waiting for the prime minister, who is heavily preoccupied by his domestic agenda, to spell out his approach to the EU. "There are lots of positive noises. That's good, but there isn't actually any substance to gauge it yet," the diplomat said.

Sources point out they have been through the new UK prime minister cycle a few times before. "We had similar hopes with Liz Truss," said a second EU diplomat. "There isn't much apprehension left when it is the third prime minister in a couple of months Obviously, we see the political turmoil in the UK and it's clear that the UK government, and perhaps the UK political class, need to start sorting some things out internally, before they can be a stable and reliable partner externally."

Mujtaba Rahman, the managing director for Europe at the Eurasia Group, believes a bigger breakthrough is on the horizon. He sees a window of opportunity opening up after the government's fiscal statement on 17 November, when Sunak will be freer to look beyond the domestic agenda.

"The single most important thing he has got to do is restore the UK's reputation for economic competence," after the "spectacular failure" of Truss's economic experiment, Rahman said.