

Introductory remarks by Michel Barnier at the press conference following the General Affairs Council (Article 50)

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, a word of thanks to the Estonian Presidency and to Matti Maasikas, and to the whole team in the Embassy, and to all the Ministers doing a tremendous job – in particular in my area – in a spirit of trust and reciprocity that I would like to commend.

In her speech in Florence, Theresa May expressed a constructive spirit, which is also ours, as the Ministers unanimously confirmed today in the Council.

What matters now – during this limited time, when every day we are getting closer to the 29 March 2019: the day the UK will become a third country, as was its wish and demand – is that the UK government translates Mrs. May's statements into clear negotiating positions.

And that we discuss in detail these positions around the negotiating table.

We are therefore at a moment of clarity, particularly regarding citizens' rights and the financial settlement. And we need to advance on finding a unique solution for Ireland. On all of these subjects, and on a few others, this is the moment of clarity.

Since Friday, the 27 Member States have reaffirmed their unity. This was once again confirmed in the discussions in the Council today.

And this unity is shared also by the political groups I met this morning in the European Parliament– as I do almost every week.

A word now on the new, key element raised in Theresa May's speech: The United Kingdom requested for the first time a transition period for a limited amount of time beyond its withdrawal from the European Union and its institutions.

This is currently not part of my mandate, but I would like to insist on a few conditions that the European Council has already set out. Allow me to refer you to the European Council guidelines, which must be read regularly – as I often do.

1. The Union also must decide if such a period is in its interest.
2. Any transition must respect the legal and financial framework of the Single Market. To quote the European Council: "Should a time-limited prolongation of Union acquis be considered, this would require existing Union regulatory, budgetary, supervisory, judiciary and enforcement instruments and structures to apply." Those are the words of the European Council. I think that everybody should remember them.

3. Finally, discussions on a transition – which will now take place since the UK has requested it –do not absolve us from the necessity of making “sufficient progress.” Progress on our three key issues remains more than ever necessary in order to build the trust needed to begin discussing our future relationship.

A final point, which is also important, is that we do not mix up the discussion on liabilities and commitments from the past – which are the subjects that make up the orderly withdrawal – with a discussion on the future relationship.

The fourth round of negotiations this week should allow us to advance on each of these key points and to get the clarity that is needed to make progress.