

Remarks by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the joint press point with Jüri Ratas, Prime Minister of Estonia, and Vice-President Andrus Ansip upon the visit of the Estonian government to the European Commission

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Vice-President and myself, we are delighted to welcome Jüri and his government here today to lay the foundations for the first ever Estonian Presidency. It is a good moment in the Estonian history and it will be a good moment for the European Union.

I have my experiences with Presidencies. I had to chair the Council and the European Council five times in my life, and so I know that the Presidencies of smaller countries are by far more successful than those of big countries. And I am really impressed by the good preparation we have noted today of the Estonian government for this major task. 1,300 Estonian officials are involved in the Presidency. That is a huge number because that is 1% of the entire population of Estonia – and so I am sure that this Presidency will be a success.

Estonia is a country I like very much. I paid two official visits to Estonia: the first time I was there, Mart Laar was the Prime Minister. The second time I was there, Andrus was the Prime Minister. And what I do not like in Estonia is that the policy-makers are as young as they are. Mart Laar was young; Andrus – who is my good friend – is closer to me when it comes to this stupid comparison. And now Jüri is the youngest Prime Minister we have in Europe. He was born in '78, and I got married in '79. You do not remember it, but I remember it. So I am very happy to go back to Estonia by the end of June.

I like Estonia and the Prime Minister, because he is like his country: young, forward-looking, pro-European, digital, and ahead of his time. You have to prove it.

Estonia has great ambitions and rightly so. Estonia, in many respects, is an example for the other Member States of the European Union. And although Estonia only joined in 2004, Estonia is behaving like a founding member of the European Union, whereas some founding members are behaving like brand new members of the European Union. So we are looking to this Presidency with great hope and great expectation.

We have seen in our conversation today that the Estonian government – as far as its agenda and programme is concerned – is very much in line with the

ideas and the initiatives of the Commission, is ready to deliver on the Working Programme the Commission, the Council and Parliament have concluded. And we would like Estonia to focus on digital, because Estonia has a real outstanding expertise when it comes to digital, and so we are in safe hands. The same applies to energy efficiency and renewable energy where Estonia too is a model for others.

I would leave it with Jüri to explain what he has in mind and then to Andrus to explain what we think about that.

Questions and Answers

Q1. Which one of these two do you think is the greater challenge for the Estonian Presidency: reforming the Common European Asylum System – in which we have not seen much progress in the past two Presidencies – or keeping the Brexit negotiations on track? How big do you think the Estonian influence will actually be?

President Juncker: I think that digital is the most important performance Estonia could give as a gift, knowing what is what, to the European Union. Brexit is an important issue, but we have a Chief Negotiator, so there will be no negotiations between the Presidency and the British in a direct, intimate way; this will be done by the Chief Negotiator. The second point you mentioned was the asylum reform – that is important.

Q2. To the Prime Minister: this morning, the Brexit Minister David Davies threatened – or suggested, maybe I should say – that he might walk out of negotiations. Will you be able to keep the EU 27 together and supporting the Chief Negotiator, Michel Barnier? President Juncker, yesterday Theresa May said: "The next person to find out that I am a bloody difficult woman will be Jean-Claude Juncker". I was wondering if you have any response to that sort of rhetoric.

President Juncker: I am not using this rhetoric, because in different translations it could mean different things. I deeply respect the British Prime Minister; I like her as a person. I have noted that she is a tough lady – so this is not for the future, this is a real-time description. And I do not think that David was right when he was threatening that he would be ready to go out. My experience in politics always was that those who were going out had to come back.