

Speech by First Vice-President Timmermans on behalf of President Juncker at the Plenary Session of the European Parliament on the Preparation of the European Council meeting of 21-22 March 2019 and the UK's withdrawal from the EU

Opening remarks

Thank you very much, Mister President.

So here we are. After another vote in the House of Commons, the Withdrawal Agreement has been voted down – regardless of the extra clarifications given, regardless of the tremendous effort by Michel Barnier and Jean-Claude Juncker to help Theresa May clarify the issues. Still, the Withdrawal Agreement was voted down.

So again, today, we will be waiting for the next vote in the House of Commons, because the only ones who can give us any direction on where we need to go from now are the Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom, in the House of Commons.

And I believe this House and the European Commission remain on the same line: to do as little harm as possible to Europeans, whether they live in the United Kingdom or on the continent. This is our duty, to think about our citizens, to think about our enterprises, to think about our interests, broadly, on both sides of the Channel.

And I say this because what we have tried to do – mainly Michel has tried to do – is to make sure that the red lines put on the table by the British government and the need for us to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland and to maintain the integrity of the Internal Market are brought together. And I do not see any better solution than the Withdrawal Agreement with all the clarifications given.

So now, this is where we are. Of course we will remain in this position, to want to do as little harm as possible in a very harmful process, because Brexit is very harmful to the United Kingdom and to the European Union. But it is our duty on the basis of a vote of the British people to work towards a Brexit that does as little harm as possible. This position will not change. But today we are in the hands of the British political system. They should tell us where they want to go from now. The solution will have to come from London and we will take it from there.

And of course there are many other issues Europe has to deal with in the next couple of years and that is why the European Council also focuses on other issues.

Industrial policy. Our industry is strong and it is the engine of our economy. It employs 32 million people and directly accounts for more than two-thirds of our exports. It is one of the main reasons we have partners lining up at our door to secure free and fair trade agreements. But we must do more. We want to see strong European companies, boosted by fair competition at home, leading in the world and addressing major challenges such as climate change.

In particular, we urge the Member States to make the most of major common European projects that matter to us all, for instance in strategic areas such as next generation batteries to store clean energy or the work on artificial intelligence.

Most importantly, we want to make sure that as industry and technologies develop, we continue to defend our values. Because ultimately, we do all of this in the interest and the wellbeing of all Europeans. That is why we propose work-life balance, equal pay for equal work in the same place and the European Labour Authority, to name but a few. It is all part and parcel of our consistent efforts to make our Single Market of 500 million informed consumers and thriving businesses deeper and fairer. And it is high time to deliver on all its dimensions, particularly in services, digital, energy and also importantly the Capital Markets Union.

Ce Conseil européen sera aussi l'occasion de parler de notre relation avec la Chine, à quelques jours du sommet Union européenne – Chine.

La Chine est à la fois dans différents domaines politiques un partenaire de coopération, un partenaire de négociation, un concurrent économique, un rival systémique promouvant des modèles alternatifs de gouvernance. Les autorités chinoises ont exprimé à maintes reprises leur volonté de contribuer à un avenir qui soit celui d'une mondialisation économique plus ouverte et plus inclusive.

L'Union européenne, pour sa part, est l'une des économies les plus ouvertes au monde, mais ce n'est pas offert. Elle est un ardent défenseur du multilatéralisme sur la base de valeurs qui profitent à tous et de règles qui doivent être équitables pour tous. Sans pour autant être un adepte naïf du libre-échange. Et c'est la raison pour laquelle nous avons notamment proposé de mettre en place un instrument international sur les marchés publics, afin de promouvoir un accès ouvert aux marchés publics dans le monde entier.

C'est dans notre intérêt mutuel de faire en sorte qu'il y ait entre la Chine et l'Union européenne encore plus de confiance et plus de coopération; plus de réciprocité aussi afin que nos investisseurs et nos entreprises bénéficient en Chine des mêmes conditions d'ouverture que celles offertes aux investisseurs et entreprises de Chine en Europe. Malheureusement, aujourd'hui, ce n'est pas le cas.

Il va sans dire que nous avons l'obligation de défendre nos valeurs, nos intérêts stratégiques et de protéger nos industries, nos travailleurs et nos citoyens contre toute concurrence déloyale.

C'est pourquoi nous avons proposé d'établir un nouveau cadre pour le filtrage des investissements étrangers afin de préserver nos actifs stratégiques européens. Je tiens ici à saluer le travail remarquable du Parlement pour l'adoption de cette initiative en un temps record.

Il est tout aussi clair que nous avons intérêt non seulement à préserver mais aussi à améliorer le système multilatéral existant, notamment sur les questions des aides et des subventions d'état. La Chine doit aussi y assumer sa part de responsabilité.

Echte Souveränität kann die Europäische Union auch als weltweite Vorreiterin im Klimaschutz zeigen.

Bis zum Jahr 2050 können wir der erste große klimaneutrale Wirtschaftsraum der Welt werden und damit Leuchtturm für andere sein.

Verantwortung für die Klimaziele zu übernehmen, das heißt für die Kommission: ein Viertel des zukünftigen Mehrjährigen Finanzrahmens den Klimazielen zu widmen; unsere Energieeinfuhren bis 2050 mehr als zu halbieren und dafür in erneuerbare Energien zu investieren; niemandem die Existenzgrundlage zu entziehen – denn es ist möglich, Emissionen zu senken und gleichzeitig innovative, hochwertige Arbeitsplätze zu schaffen.

Ich danke diesem Hause für Ihre Unterstützung unserer Vorschläge für nachhaltige Investitionen, auf die wir stolz sein können: Europa übernimmt damit weltweit eine Führungsrolle, wenn es darum geht, private Investitionen so umzuorientieren, dass sie zur Verwirklichung der Ziele des Pariser Abkommens beitragen und damit einen klimaneutralen Wirtschaftsraum schaffen.

Es bewegt mich, dass viele junge Menschen wieder auf die Straße gehen, um für noch ambitioniertere Ziele zu kämpfen. Das ist wirklich ein Europa, das mir Mut für die Zukunft macht. Und ich danke wirklich Greta und allen anderen jungen Leute für diese Inspiration.

Mut brauchen wir auch, um eine der größten Herausforderungen für unsere Demokratien zu bewältigen: Die bewussten Versuche, unsere Debatten und unsere Wahlen zu manipulieren.

Unsere Botschaft ist: Europa bleibt offen. Die Meinungsfreiheit ist weiterhin unser höchstes Gut.

Aber wir sind nicht naiv. Wir sind uns bewusst, dass es Kräfte gibt, die unsere Demokratie unterbrechen und untergraben wollen. Und das wird im Wahlkampf eine große Herausforderung sein. Wir müssen darauf achten.

Ich begrüße daher, dass das Europäische Parlament und die Mitgliedstaaten die Maßnahmen der Europäischen Kommission unterstützen, um gegen Desinformation und Eingriffe in unsere Wahlen vorzugehen. Aber wir stehen erst am Anfang. Es gibt noch viel zu tun.

Denn souverän bleiben wir als Europäische Union nur, wenn wir kompromisslos für unsere Werte aufstehen – innerhalb der Europäischen Union und auch draußen.

Herzlichen Dank, Herr Präsident.

Closing remarks

Thank you very much, Madame President.

Having listened very carefully to this Parliament, I come to the conclusion that there is very, very broad support in this Parliament for the way the Commission is negotiating on behalf on the European Union, its Member States and this Parliament to try and reach an agreement with the United Kingdom on a withdrawal that would do as little harm as possible to both sides. This has been the intention of the Commission from the start. This has been the way Michel Barnier has been negotiating from the start and we feel strengthened in our approach by the debates here today.

Having listened to Mr Farage and his colleagues and seeing the hubris with which he stands here and the self-gratification of his position, I sometimes wonder: has he gone to Sunderland and talked to the workers at the Nissan plant and said to them 'It might cost you your job, but I will get my pipe dream of so-called sovereignty – but it might cost you your job, sorry, but I will get my pipe dream of so-called sovereignty' – has he done that? Has he gone to Oxford to the Mini plant and said 'I know what BMW are thinking if there is a no-deal Brexit, but I want it so badly, this no-deal Brexit, that I really do not care about your job' – has he done that? That would have been the honest thing to do, I suppose.

Has Dr Liam Fox ever said 'Well, I said it would be the easiest trade deal in human history, but on second thought, it is much more complicated than I promised before the referendum.' Has Boris Johnson gone to the doctors and nurses of the NHS and said 'I did promise you 350 million extra Pounds a week, but sorry, I cannot deliver on that promise.' Have they done that? I think frankly that we would need, if want to come out of this situation, a bit more modesty and honesty on all sides.

I also believe – I just refer to a report by the UK government published in November last year – where it said that if there is a no-deal Brexit, this would cost approximately 9.3% economic growth. Are you willing to pay that price, I ask the Brexiteers on this side? Are you willing to pay that price? Are you willing to sacrifice all those jobs for your pipe dream of so-called sovereignty. What is that sovereignty going to bring to you if you live that pipe dream?

[MEP Coburn: Freedom is essential! Chair: Mr Coburn, excuse me Vice-President Timmermans, can I just say – Mr Coburn, you and I have a special relationship. I am special and I do not know what you are. So please do not interrupt. And I know Ms Atkinson takes issue with me at occasion, please listen with respect. You may disagree, but I would urge you to listen, and maybe learn.]

Madame President, I did listen to Mr Coburn and he says liberty is more important. Then have the courage and go to Sunderland and talk to the workers in the Nissan plant. Talk to the workers in Oxford at the Mini plant and tell them 'My so-called liberty is more important than you jobs.' Have the courage to do that, Sir. And then also go to Ireland and go to a place where since 1998 peace reigns and violence has disappeared and tell the people there 'My pipe dream is more important than your peace and quiet. My pipe dream is more important, and I will accept a hard border, if that gives me my no-deal Brexit.' Have that courage!

And I always hear – do you know the number 16.1 million? I never hear it mentioned. I always hear 17.4 million. Yes, but 16.1 million are also British citizens who voted to stay. They have not disappeared. Is it not at the essence of European democracy that we also respect the position of minorities in our countries? Is it not in the essence of democracy that we try to build bridges to find solutions that can be carried by most people in our society? Should that not be the next steps we take in this?

And to be very clear: Why does the Commission stand so firmly for the integrity of the Internal Market? Why do we not simply say, let us have open borders? I give you one example: If for some reason the United Kingdom would decide to have a trade deal with the United States on their terms, and chlorinated chicken would be coming into the United Kingdom, and we would not be able to check that at the European border, then we would not be able to say to European citizens 'We can protect you against something that you do not want.' We could never do that. That is why we always have to protect the integrity of the Internal Market.

And we have been bending over backwards and we have spared no effort – and I do pay tribute to Michel Barnier – we spared no effort to try and reconcile Madame May's red lines and her demands with our firm duty to protect the European Union and the integrity of the Internal Market. The Withdrawal Agreement is the best and only possible solution to that dilemma. And I hope this is something that will be well understood. This is a position the Commission defends on your behalf. The vast majority of this Parliament supports this. And we will continue to do that, to protect the interests of European citizens, whether they live on the continent or in the United Kingdom.

Thank you very much, Madame President.