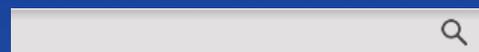


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## Statement by the Taoiseach on the European Council, Brussels, 22-23 June 2017, Dáil Éireann, 28 June 2017

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Ceann Comhairle,

Last Thursday and Friday, I travelled to Brussels for a meeting of the European Council, where I joined with other leaders in discussing a range of important issues facing the Union.

This was my first meeting of the European Council since being elected Taoiseach, and it was a very useful opportunity to meet all my EU counterparts.

In addition to informal exchanges in the margins of the meeting, I had excellent bilateral meetings with European Council President Tusk; European Commission President Juncker, who was accompanied by Michel Barnier; Chancellor Merkel; and Prime Minister Ratas of Estonia, who will take over the EU Presidency on 1 July. As I said earlier in the Dáil, these discussions focused mainly on Brexit and the ongoing need to respond to Ireland's particular concerns. I thanked partners for their engagement and support to date, and emphasised our commitment to remaining at the heart of Europe.

European Council, 22-23 June

The agenda of the European Council included security and defence; migration; jobs, growth and competitiveness; external relations; the Paris Agreement on Climate Change; and Digital Europe. I was reassured by the strong show of unity on these issues, with partners displaying commitment to move ahead together, and a certain degree of optimism for the future.

European Council (Article 50) - Brexit

We also discussed Brexit, which I will deal with first. During the meeting, Prime Minister May outlined her thinking about the rights of EU citizens living in the UK. The rights of such citizens, and those of UK citizens living in other EU Member States, is a priority issue for both sides in the Brexit negotiations, and the UK presented its more detailed paper on the matter on Monday. We will be studying this carefully, together with our EU partners. The EU has set out its own position clearly in the negotiating guidelines and directives, and in its position paper. I hope that progress can be made as quickly as possible, so that some certainty can be provided early in the withdrawal process to citizens and their families.

Prime Minister May then left the meeting and we continued at 27 - in Article 50 format - to discuss issues relating to Brexit.

Michel Barnier provided an update on the opening of negotiations with the UK last Monday, which were seen as generally positive and constructive. In line with the EU guidelines, the Irish-specific concerns - protecting the Good Friday Agreement and the gains of the peace process; avoiding a hard border through imaginative and flexible solutions; and maintaining the Common Travel Area - will be prioritised in this first phase of the negotiations, before we move onto discussions about the shape of the future relationship.

It is worth noting that we also adopted and agreed to publish the minutes of the previous Article 50 meeting of the European Council: these confirm that, if the provision in the Good Friday Agreement on unity by peaceful and democratic means is invoked at some time in the future, EU membership is assured.

These outcomes all indicate that our extensive campaign of strategic outreach at political, diplomatic and official level over the past year has been effective in ensuring that our unique circumstances and particular concerns in relation to Brexit are well understood and acknowledged.

We also agreed on the procedures for relocating the two EU Agencies currently located in the UK - the European Medicines Agency and the European Banking Agency.

As Deputies will be aware, Ireland has launched bids for both Agencies, and I believe that we offer the best location in terms of business continuity, connectivity, facilities and other factors. We will formally submit our bids before the deadline of the end of July and will continue our campaign ahead of the vote by Ministers.

In the discussions, the need for continuing unity at 27 was also emphasised.

Jobs, Growth and Competitiveness

Returning to the main part of the European Council, we considered a range of economic issues under the heading of Jobs, Growth and Competitiveness.



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Tour of the Department

The President of the ECB, Mario Draghi, gave a presentation about the EU and Eurozone economies: this was generally positive, indicating that growth and a broad-based recovery are now taking hold. Increased confidence is being translated into more investment, more consumption and - most importantly - more jobs. I asked Mr. Draghi about the general direction of monetary policy and interest rates, and was reassured by his emphasis on stability - particularly as it affects so many Irish people with high mortgages, and provides some certainty as we continue our economic recovery.

We noted the progress achieved in relation to the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI), and called for its rapid expansion and reinforcement; and we also generally endorsed the Country Specific Recommendations, thereby completing the 2017 European Semester.

We also discussed the Single Market and trade policy. As Deputies will be aware, I support a high level of ambition for the Single Market, particularly with regard to cross-border trade in services - and, together with a number of my counterparts, I ensured that a specific reference to services was included in the Council Conclusions.

I also joined with 16 of my counterparts in writing to President Tusk in advance of the Council, calling for greater ambition and political prioritisation of the Digital Single Market, and highlighting the importance of adhering to our deadlines. And I strongly supported the priority the incoming Estonian Presidency has attached to Digital Europe.

We had a very dynamic and interesting discussion on trade. I stressed our support for a robust, free trade policy, upholding an open and rules-based multilateral trading system. At the same time, we have to recognise that we are an increasingly smaller part of the world economy, and there are issues around third countries obtaining control of certain key interests, such as public infrastructure. We understand the views of some Member States about controlling sensitive or strategic assets: however, companies can also benefit from foreign cash and expertise, and we should not put unnecessary barriers in the way of inward investment.

The Council Conclusions provide such a reflective, targeted approach: I am pleased with the text, which responds to our concerns as a pro-enterprise, pro-trade, small country.

#### Security and Defence

The discussions on security and defence covered both the internal and external aspects. I offered Ireland's continuing solidarity with those who have suffered from terrorist attacks, and emphasised our strong commitment to working closely with partners to fight terrorism, hatred and violent extremism. We discussed efforts to tackle the spread of radicalism online and its financing, and called upon industry to play its part in detecting and removing content that incites violence. The challenges inherent in tackling terrorist communications, while at the same time safeguarding privacy, were acknowledged.

On the external dimension, we heard a report from the High Representative, Federica Mogherini, on the implementation of the EU Global Strategy one year after its adoption. We are strong supporters of this strategy, and have emphasised the need for the comprehensive implementation of all five of its priorities - important if all Member States are to contribute and play an active part. Using the Union's unique mix of diplomatic, civilian and peace-keeping capabilities will help protect our citizens, and contribute to peace and security in our neighbourhood and beyond.

The strategy also provides the framework for EU cooperation with NATO, focused on peace-keeping and maintaining international peace and security. This is conducted in full respect for the decision-making autonomy of both organisations, and for the security and defence policies of individual member states, including Ireland.

Just as new security threats have evolved, so too has the EU response, in terms of what we can do to confront cyber, hybrid and terrorist threats. International peace support requires the availability of suitable military capabilities and there have been some developments around financing, including a Commission communication on a European Defence Fund; proposals around a European Defence Industrial Development Programme; and an invitation to the European Investment Bank to examine its role.

Ireland's neutrality is of course fully respected, and we do not participate in any military alliance. However, we favour initiatives to strengthen the EU's capacity to act as an international peace provider, particularly in support of the United Nations. We also support cooperation within the Union to achieve common objectives in response to the range of new and growing threats.

#### Migration

The discussion on migration included updates on the implementation of the Malta Declaration, with its particular focus on the Central Mediterranean route; as well as developments relating to the Migration Partnership Framework, and the EU-Turkey Statement.

While there have been some positive developments - particularly along the Eastern Mediterranean route - the situation remains critical in terms of irregular arrivals through the Central Mediterranean. We agreed to improve our coordination efforts here, provide more support for Italy, and try to end the tragic situation where so many people are losing their lives.

Ireland has consistently called for a comprehensive response to the migration crisis, that responds both to its effects, and to its underlying root causes.

From our own perspective, this has included a commitment to take in up to 4,000 asylum seekers and refugees under the EU Relocation and Resettlement

Programmes, and under our own programme, together with the UNHCR; to provide naval vessels to help with search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean; and to supply humanitarian assistance to those affected by the Syria crisis - to date, we have provided €76.5 million.

Ceann Comhairle,

Notwithstanding the serious challenges we face, including in relation to Brexit, the European Council revealed a strong sense of unity in working together to find solutions to shared problems. Ireland's interests are clearly best served by remaining at the centre of this work, and I took the opportunity in engaging with my EU counterparts to reiterate our strong commitment to EU membership and our intention to continue playing an active and constructive role in these efforts.

The Minister for European Affairs, Helen McEntee, will provide further detail in her wrap-up statement about our discussions on external relations.

I now look forward to hearing statements from Deputies.

Thank you.

ENDS

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## Contact Us

**Department of the Taoiseach**  
Government Buildings,  
Upper Merrion Street,  
Dublin 2  
D02 R583

✉ [webmaster@taoiseach.gov.ie](mailto:webmaster@taoiseach.gov.ie)

☎ Ph: 353 1 619 4000  
LoCall: 1890 227 227



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