

Check against delivery

Joint Committee on EU Affairs, 15 February 2017

Statement by the Minister of State for European Affairs, EU Digital Single Market and Data Protection, Dara Murphy T.D.

Chairman

I am very pleased to be back before the Joint Committee this afternoon for what will be a shorter session than normal. I want to thank you, Chairman, for agreeing to this shorter format to allow attendance at the Taoiseach's keynote address entitled *Ireland at the heart of a changing European Union* taking place at the Mansion House in a little over an hour. With your agreement, and in order to allow the maximum time for questions, I will keep my remarks as short as possible.

I would like to brief the Committee on the two General Affairs Councils I attended since our last meeting. I will also mention briefly the issues which are likely to feature on the agenda of the March European Council.

January Informal GAC

The first of the General Affairs Councils I attended – and the first under the Maltese Presidency – was an Informal held in Valletta on 23/24 January. There were two agenda items. The – the first was on Maltese Presidency Priorities. The Maltese have identified six priorities: Migration; the Single Market; Security; Social Inclusion; Europe's Neighbourhood and Maritime issues. Ireland supports these priorities. In our view, they are realistic and achievable and they address many of the key challenges facing the European Union.

Of the six, the Maltese have highlighted Migration as their number one priority. The migration crisis may have faded from the media headlines in recent months but it is far from resolved. On the contrary, the migration crisis remains one of

the biggest challenges facing the EU. 181,000 migrants entered the Union last year via the Central Mediterranean Route – essentially from Libya to Italy. And behind this headline figure are hundreds drowned, and lives shattered. Migration will remain high on the EU agenda for the foreseeable future and the March European Council will address it again as it has done continuously since the crisis developed in the spring of 2015.

The second item on the agenda of the January GAC was the Future of Europe. To frame discussions the Maltese Presidency produced a short paper highlighting the need for citizens' trust to be re-established in the European project, and for the delivery of a realistic agenda focused on practical issues. Ireland strongly supports this approach. We want to see the Bratislava Process (launched in the aftermath of the British referendum and the focus of President Tusk's informal Summit of Heads of State and Government in Bratislava in September) concentrate on practical issues which improve the lives of our citizens, among them increased investment and creating more job opportunities. Progress in implementing the Single Market, and particularly the Digital Single Market, would be an important contribution to achieving this.

On 3 February the leaders of the EU 27 had another meeting to discuss what they envisage for the Rome Summit on 25 March, the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. No written conclusions emerged from the meeting, but there was, as I indicated above, broad agreement that now is not the time for bold new initiatives, still less consideration of Treaty change, but that work on existing priorities should be energised. Given also the changing geopolitical landscape, there was also a strong view that the importance of the Union in protecting and promoting European values and interests should be stressed.

February GAC

The agenda for the second GAC I attended earlier this month was relatively light, with preparations for the March European Council being the main item. The

other items on the agenda were European Council follow-up and a Communication from the European Commission on the next steps for a sustainable European future. What is involved here is mapping the EU's response to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted at a special Summit in 2015.

The Presidency flagged the main topics on the provisional agenda of the March European Council (Jobs, Growth and Investment; Migration and Security). As is normal practice, there will be a discussion on External Relations but specific topics for discussion have not yet been decided.

The European Commission has said that it sees the March European Council being about consolidation, restoring the security of our citizens from both internal and external challenges. At the GAC meeting I said that from Ireland's viewpoint, the March European Council will be an important step in refocusing the EU. While there are a myriad of items competing for attention, we need to give adequate attention to economic issues – bread and butter issues if you like – which are of immediate concern to our citizens, and will make a tangible improvement to their lives. If we want to seriously address the gap which many EU citizens see between the Union and the lives they lead, this is one pragmatic way to do it.

This meeting of the European Council should be a tangible demonstration of the Union's determination to focus on and deliver on specific and concrete issues.

Finally, the British Government has repeated its commitment to formally notify by the end of March the UK's intention to leave the Union by the end of next month. There has been much recent speculation that this could happen earlier rather than later in March. Either way, it seems unlikely that there will be much, if any, discussion at the European Council, though of course Brexit will be very much in the air. The first step after the British notification will be for the European Council to adopt guidelines for the negotiations. It is likely that there will be a special meeting of the European Council some weeks after the

notification. Then, again probably a few weeks later, it will be for the GAC formally to open the negotiations and to agree on a more detailed mandate for the Commission as negotiator. Ambassadors in Brussels, assisted by a special working group, will monitor the progress of the negotiations on a weekly basis, and the GAC and, ultimately, the European Council will oversee the negotiations at a political level, issuing new instructions as needed.

Chairman

With your agreement, I will end here and am happy to take questions.

Thank you.