

15 December 2021

Irish parliament: joint committee on EU affairs

Honourable members, dear colleagues, good morning.

First, my apologies on behalf of Commissioner Ferreira. Health related issues have prevented her from being here today. But she recognises the importance of your work, and wanted to contribute to your discussions. So thank you for permitting me to speak in her place.

It is always a pleasure to discuss cohesion policy, here in Ireland. We have a long and illustrious history of working together for our common European good. And this discussion is very timely, as we begin to write the next chapter of our history together.

The European Union has been a project of solidarity between countries and solidarity between peoples. Cohesion policy has been a concrete expression of that solidarity, of which we all stand to gain.

Today I would like to address 2 key expressions of European solidarity with the people of Ireland.

First, the Brexit Adjustment Reserve. This is European solidarity in action with those suffering the economic and social fallout of Brexit.

Since Ireland was the most impacted, Ireland will get the most support: 1.16 billion euros.

A particular consideration should be given for the fishing industry, but Member States have some discretion to invest these funds in the sectors and regions that have been most affected.

Ireland was the first Member State to receive prepayments under the Brexit Adjustment Reserve. 361 million euros will be disbursed before Christmas corresponding to the 2021 tranche. We are here to help you with any and all practicalities to ensure these investments rapidly reach all those who need them most.

The second expression of European solidarity with Ireland, is the new PEACE PLUS programme. As you know, this is a unique programme. Unique in its goal of promoting peace and reconciliation between the communities across the border. Unique in its successful history and track record, of making a real difference on the ground. And unique in terms of the broad support it commands, not just across the

communities of Northern Ireland, but also across the European Union, and even with the UK authorities.

It is no secret, that the post-Brexit relationship with the UK has not been as smooth as we would have wished.

Discussions have been intense on a proper application of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Northern Ireland Protocol.

But on the PEACE PLUS, we have had good cooperation.

And this is important, because as you know, the situation on the ground has deteriorated, and the PEACE PLUS programme is needed, now more than ever. We need a grassroots approach, which draws both communities together. Economic prosperity is key to consolidating the progress made over the past 30 years and to safeguard the Good Friday Agreement. And for that we need a seamless cooperation between the two sides of the border.

The programme is ready with 1.1 billion euros of investment to promote peace, economic regeneration and empowering youth, among others. There has been an exceptionally good public consultation, with thorough involvement of both communities and both sides of the border. Now we must get to work, so that the programme can start on time, in the first quarter of 2022.

Let me also highlight the contribution of Cohesion policy for Ireland with a total of 1.3 billion euros, including the new Just Transition Fund which will support the Midlands in transitioning out of peat for electricity generation.

The discussions on the Partnership Agreement with the overall strategic orientation are ongoing and we hope that the funds can hit the ground in mid-2022.

I would like to finish with the words of James Joyce, who said: “I am tomorrow, or some future day, what I establish today. I am today what I established yesterday, or some previous day”. So, let’s continue building on the solid ground established since Ireland’s accession. Let’s lay the basis today with the funds and opportunities made available by the European membership, from PEACE PLUS to the Brexit Adjustment Reserve, from the Recovery and Resilience Facility, to mainstream cohesion policy, of successful and prosperous next generations of Irish citizens.