

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ AN AONTAIS EORPAIGH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS

Déardaoin, 8 Meán Fómhair 2016

Thursday, 8 September 2016

The Joint Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan,	Senator Paul Coghlan,
Deputy Seán Haughey,	Senator Gerard P. Craughwell,
Deputy Frank O'Rourke,	Senator Terry Leyden,
	Senator Neale Richmond.

DEPUTY MICHAEL HEALY-RAE IN THE CHAIR.

The joint committee met in private session until 12 noon.

Priorities of Slovak Presidency of European Council: Slovak Ambassador to Ireland

Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I welcome H.E. Mr. Dušan Matulay, who is the ambassador of Slovakia to Ireland. He is accompanied by Mr. Roman Goga and Mr. Dušan Tomasta from the Slovak Embassy. I sincerely thank them for coming here today. The members of the committee and I extend a warm welcome to them. I thank them for meeting us today to discuss the priorities of the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU.

I want to read a brief privilege notice before we begin. Members are reminded of a long-standing parliamentary practice or long-standing ruling of the Chair to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they give to the committee. If they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given. They are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I invite the ambassador to make his opening remarks.

H.E. Mr. Dušan Matulay: It is my great pleasure and honour to join the distinguished Chairman and members of the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs of the Oireachtas here today. The role of national parliaments has increased significantly since the Lisbon treaty. Interparliamentary co-operation is a key ingredient of an accountable EU. It enhances legitimacy and reduces democratic deficit. COSAC is an important platform of discussion among parliamentarians. I know the members of this committee were not able to join the first COSAC meeting in July in Bratislava but I hope they will be able to join their colleagues at the plenary meeting in November, especially as the voice of small countries is very important.

As the Slovak ambassador to Ireland, I feel especially privileged to present the priorities of the first Slovak Presidency in the Irish Parliament because the EU journey of my country started in Ireland. It is a historic fact that in 2004, the biggest EU enlargement ever took place in Ireland and became a hallmark of the Irish EU Presidency. It was the Oireachtas which had to ratify our accession. In 2004, Ireland prepared a generous welcome for the new member states. For that reason, I would like to start my presentation unconventionally by bringing closer those glorious days with the words of the most appropriate master, the great Irish bard, the late Seamus Heaney, who wrote a poem dedicated to the accession of the new member states and recited it in the Phoenix Park in May 2004. I apologise in advance for my Irish language pronunciation. I will do my best to pronounce them correctly. The poem, “Beacons at Bealtaine”, reads:

Uisce: water. And fionn: the water’s clear.

But dip and find this Gaelic water Greek: A phoenix flames upon fionn uisce here.

*Strangers were barbaroi to the Greek ear. Now let the heirs of all who could not speak
The language, whose ba-babbling was unclear,*

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Come with their gift of tongues past each frontier
And find the answering voices that they seek
As *fionn* and *uisce* answer phoenix here.

The May Day hills were burning, far and near,
When our land's first footers beached
boats in the creek
In *uisce, fionn*, strange words that soon grew clear;

So on a day when newcomers appear
Let it be a homecoming and let us speak
The un-strange word, as it behoves us here,

Move lips, move minds and make new meanings flare
Like ancient beacons signalling, peak
to peak,
From middle sea to north sea, shining clear
As phoenix flame upon *fionn uisce* here.

I do not want to dare to interpret the great master, but what I feel from his verses is a sense of unity and optimism and I cannot shake off the feeling that we are sometimes lacking such ingredients these days.

After 12 years of EU membership, Slovakia is honoured to lead the Union. The Presidency is a milestone in the history of Slovakia on the bumpy road since independence in 1993. Now we have a good story to tell. It began with our predecessors' dream to be part of a free and democratic world and continued with our integration into the European family of nations, with which we are bound by our rich history, diverse cultures and common values. Indeed, "back to Europe" was one of the principal credos of the Tender Revolution in 1989, when we obliterated a brutal undemocratic regime with peaceful means. It was a voice of our European identity. We are proud to call the EU our home, the euro our currency and Schengen our area. The EU provides us with security, stability and prosperity. We are grateful for that because we were given a lot. Now it is time to finish the story by giving something back.

We will not have it easy. We joined the Union at a time when optimism about the European project was at its peak, but we have taken over the Presidency at a time when passion for EU membership has been replaced by euroscepticism and enlargement fatigue, a fragmented and individualistic approach is winning over unity and joint action, radicalism and extremism are putting pressure on mainstream parties with their easy solutions to complex problems, the economic and financial crisis has shattered our trust in the euro and our economic foundations, our high expectations of brighter futures for our eastern and southern neighbours are appearing quite distant, migration has touched upon our humanism and capacity to help the rest of the world and one country has decided to leave the Union.

The EU has become a victim of its own success. The benefits of EU membership are perceived as granted or are downplayed. The Union's shortcomings are often blown out of proportion or presented in a deliberately misleading and negative manner. On the other hand, there are sometimes tendencies to procrastinate and to offer pseudo-solutions, which solve nothing or make things worse. All in all, it is a perfect breeding ground for populists, political soldiers of fortune and those who are not happy about the strength and success of the European project. We have failed to communicate the benefits of the Union to our citizens. We should not hide behind complicated language but rather talk simply and clearly. We must talk the language of ordinary people rather than the language of technocrats, lawyers and bureaucrats.

We should also think of new and more attractive ways of engaging the wider public in EU affairs. Our communication strategy must be tailor-made depending on the situation and audience. The EU is not only formed by Brussels and its institutions but also by its member states and citizens. Therefore, the main driving force behind the EU's renovation process shall be the member states. In an open and honest dialogue with the EU institutions, we should adopt stra-

tegitic decisions accepted across the wider political spectrum because it is about member states understanding best what their citizens need. This is a serious task but we must keep calm and act in unity. All ongoing crises - not only Brexit - are a reminder that the EU and its benefits cannot be taken for granted. There is no longer enough confidence among Europeans that the EU can deliver. People fear loss of safety, identity and prosperity. Some surveys suggest that the EU does not do well on migration and the economy. Our citizens fear most that EU elites will not be able to cope with all the challenges we face. It is time to take an honest look at the union and ourselves. It is obvious that the practical and political consequences of the UK referendum will dominate the EU agenda in the coming months. We want to maintain the best possible relationship with the UK. Although we do not wish to prolong the time of uncertainty, we understand that no negotiations can start without the UK's notification of its withdrawal in the context of Article 50. Slovakia has had positive experience in the split-up of the then Czechoslovak Federation when, regardless of many emotions, the swift negotiation process was dominated by responsibility and good agreements. Those settlements were favourable for both parties and later became an important base for the following good relationship between Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Furthermore, self-reflection has become a must, not an option. There is an urgent need to jointly reflect on the future direction of the union in 27-country format. Our Presidency will convene an informal summit on 16 September in Bratislava, where Ireland will be represented by the Taoiseach.

Constructive and open dialogue about the challenges the EU is facing has never been more needed. Brexit should not dominate the summit discussions. We want to focus on security in all its forms – economic security, employment, internal security and terrorism - but also the gap of communication between the EU institutions, member states and citizens. I am sure what we all want is a modern and forward-looking Europe, a Europe of and for citizens. There is much more that unites us than divides us but we must simplify the way we talk. We must be much clearer in explaining to our citizens why the European Union is a solution and not a problem, why it is a friend and not an enemy and why it has no alternative whatsoever.

Our Presidency programme does not even pretend to contain a miraculous prescription for all EU problems but the European citizen is at the heart of our programme. We see ourselves as an honest broker, which should continue in all the previous projects and move them as far as possible and pass over to the next Presidency, which will be Malta, with a clear balance sheet. Six months of a Presidency is too short to be over-ambitious or unrealistic and we want to be pragmatic and realistic. Rome was not built in a day and a better, more effective and comprehensible Europe will not be either. The Schuman Declaration already acknowledged this in 1950 when it said, “Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.” With this aim, our Presidency intends to be pragmatic, because it is time to deliver concrete and tangible results; uniting, since we must overcome fragmentation and the individual approach in Europe; and the people's voice as we need to deal with the real problems of our people such as the economy, jobs, security, migration and terrorism. To achieve this, we have four ambitions: to make the economy stronger; to modernise and broaden the Single Market in areas such as energy and the digital economy; to work towards sustainable migration and asylum policy; and to pay attention to our external environment.

Despite the signs of recovery in the European economy after the crisis, full and sustainable recovery requires further incentives. Our first priority area is thus focused on initiatives aimed at creating a supportive environment for the investments and further development of the union. The Slovak Presidency is convinced that efficient use of the investment instruments and pursu-

ing structural reforms and promoting a responsible approach to public finances are at the heart of an economically strong Europe. The Economic and Monetary Union remains incomplete. Therefore, the Slovak Presidency will support the implementation of the actions that will give positive momentum to its completion. The economic crisis has shown that to enable the union to better deal with economic shocks it is necessary to deepen the Economic and Monetary Union. The completion of the banking union is an important tool for the stabilisation of the banking sector. The Presidency will pursue discussions on the European deposit insurance scheme which it sees as essential for improving the protection of depositors and for financial stability. To boost investment, the Slovak Presidency will strive to strengthen the investment potential of the European Fund for Strategic Investments. The Presidency will develop further the proposals contained in the recent communication of the Commission, the aim of which is to ensure the delivery of the maximum investment potential of the fund.

The Slovak Presidency will also support innovative and alternative sources of finance for companies among other means through the capital markets union. The capital markets union aims to open up alternative sources of finance for small and medium-sized enterprises, which we deem to be very important and necessary, because they currently rely mainly on bank loans. The main result will be the gradual elimination of the remaining barriers to cross-border flows of capital which will reduce the fragmentation of financial markets in Europe.

A supportive environment is a key precondition for the development and implementation of the European projects that are the main elements of the modern Single Market. The Single Market is considered the greatest achievement of the European Union and the Slovak Presidency intends to support further development of the projects such as the digital Single Market and energy union. Free movement of data has the unique potential to remove barriers and create more opportunities for innovative businesses and for all citizens, for instance in rural areas. That is why we wish to make it a fifth EU freedom.

When it comes to concrete actions to pursue this objective, Slovakia will prioritise the elimination of barriers to the digital economy, the facilitation of the use of electronic services and access to the market, the availability of electronic content, as well as a high level of consumer protection. Goals such as the removal of roaming charges or geo-blocking are attractive and understandable to the wider public and can highlight the real benefits of the EU to the public. To stress the commitment to the digital Single Market, the Slovak Presidency will host the 2016 Digital Assembly on 28 September and 29 September in Bratislava. This high level meeting will bring together officials from member states and institutions, policy makers, and stakeholders to exchange ideas and promote an innovative environment. The ambition of the Slovak Presidency is to contribute to the creation of a resilient and competitive Energy union, with the main focus on energy security. The Presidency will thus support efforts to improve energy security.

Ambitious policy in the area of climate change, with a correct set-up of the emissions trading system and a trend towards a low-carbon economy is an integral part of the energy union. The Slovak Presidency will promote development of measures directed towards the circular economy. Our objective is to reduce waste production, protect the environment and use natural resources such as water efficiently.

The ambition of the Slovak Presidency is to move Europe towards a sustainable migration and asylum policy. It is obvious that migration will remain an urgent issue not only during our Presidency, but also in years to come. It does not represent a seasonal or local but a long-lasting and global problem. The upcoming migration summit in New York on 19 September is

a great opportunity not to be missed. The migration crisis does not have an isolated European solution. At the same time, we must realise that Europe must be the key part of a new global approach. We can help resolve the issue only through joint EU-wide efforts and at the United Nations summit on migration by having one strong and leading voice. To this end, the Slovak Presidency will promote comprehensive and sustainable solutions linking up relevant internal and external aspects.

Let us not narrow this complex problem to a single initiative, namely, the distribution of refugees. The Schengen area is one of the greatest benefits of European integration but it is not currently fulfilling its essential role, which is to ensure the free movement of citizens and goods. The Slovak Presidency regards the return to a fully functioning Schengen area as its main objective. The protection of the European Union's external borders is a key precondition to fulfil this objective. The Slovak Presidency will actively contribute to the deployment of the European border and coast guard.

Wider use of modern technology at the external borders is needed. The Slovak Presidency supports smart borders and their implementation will facilitate the handling of passengers, contribute to the fight against irregular migration and strengthen the internal security of the Union. Co-operation with third countries, namely, the countries of transit and origin of migrants, forms an integral part of a comprehensive approach to migration. The Slovak Presidency will focus on eliminating the causes of migration and will encourage the development of targeted strategies to deal with the mass movement of people. The migration and refugee crisis has led to reflections on the future of the joint European asylum system. The Slovak Presidency feels a strong responsibility for further developments in this debate and wishes it to move forward in those areas where there is agreement among member states. Legal migration should be a means of attracting highly qualified migrants wherever they are needed for our growing economies.

The Presidency will encourage an ambitious approach to internal security. The main preconditions are improved information exchange, increased operational co-operation and mutual co-ordination among the police and judicial authorities of the member states.

Supporting the reinforcement of the global role of the European Union is the intention of the Slovak Republic within the fourth priority area. The Slovak Presidency will support the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Ms Federica Mogherini. In the next period, the Union will focus on implementation of the global new EU strategy for foreign and security policy which will reinforce the role of the Union in the world, help face complex challenges and contribute to stabilising its neighbourhood.

Stability in the eastern and southern neighbourhoods of the EU has been significantly weakened in recent years. The Slovak Presidency will, therefore, promote an effective European neighbourhood policy. The enlargement policy is an effective means of ensuring a democratic transition for integrating countries and, in this regard, Slovakia can speak from experience. With a view to strengthening the policy's credibility, the Presidency will seek to maintain the momentum of the accession process and achieve concrete progress in the candidate countries.

The Presidency will also actively engage in strengthening transatlantic ties and developing relations with other strategic partners of the EU. Active engagement on the global scene must include strong trade links with key global economies. The Slovak Presidency will focus on bilateral free trade agreements with third countries.

According to different polls, Slovaks believe the European Union is still the best solution

for Europe and its citizens. The EU is a visionary project which has brought unrivalled stability, solidarity and prosperity to Europe. We seem to forget or take this for granted, however, and we accept the caricature of the Union in the media as a bureaucratic institution with an army of clerks who ponder over the shape of bananas or the size of pickles. This is not the EU we live in and whose benefits we enjoy daily. Everyone in this room knows the European Union is a solution, rather than a problem and to which there is no alternative, despite its imperfections. However, we need to find ways to convince those who remain unconvinced, many of whom are our fellow citizens outside this room.

Let me assure members that in pursuing our priorities, the Slovak Presidency will be an honest and fair broker. I hope for the joint committee's support for our Presidency because only in close co-operation with the representatives of legislative bodies can we meet our common goals towards a better Union. I thank members for their attention.

Senator Neale Richmond: I thank the ambassador for his detailed and thorough presentation and congratulate him on the achievements thus far of the Slovak Presidency. I wish it well in its final months. I propose to raise three issues. I will not lie; I was slightly disappointed by some of the comments made by Prime Minister Fico on Brexit. In our discussion in private session before the ambassador joined us, Brexit emerged as the most pressing issue facing the European Union, especially Ireland. Members are very concerned that the special position of Ireland in having a land border with the United Kingdom and various cultural and economic ties with Britain may get lost in the negotiations on Brexit. I ask the ambassador to ensure that this is borne in mind when Article 50 is triggered and negotiations begin.

I am delighted that the first priority of the Slovak Presidency is to strengthen the European Union economy. How does the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP, fit into this discussion? I fear that after the 14th round of negotiations in July and the forthcoming presidential election in the United States, concerns about transparency and the increasing opposition to TTIP, especially in Germany and France, could leave the partnership dead in the water. This would be a great opportunity missed. The ambassador correctly noted the importance of trade agreements, especially with third party countries.

On the digital Single Market, how will the European Union overcome the issue of access to countries outside the EU, including China, one of the Union's major partners but one which enforces tight censorship laws? How can this be factored into the overall strategy for developing the digital Single Market?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I also congratulate the ambassador on his presentation. He outlined a very ambitious programme for the Slovak Presidency and all members join him in hoping it achieves its objectives. It is a broad programme that is fundamentally part of what the European Union is about and something that every country would strive to achieve in the Presidency role. The committee hopes it will be successful.

I fully concur with the points raised by my colleague, Senator Richmond, particularly in respect of Brexit. Ireland and the United Kingdom have had a common trade area for many years and Brexit presents a great obstacle to this trade. It is an obstacle that is not of our making. The European Union will have a major problem on its hands as it seeks to resolve the issues that arise as a result of Brexit. This scenario has never arisen previously in this context. The UK is an island off the mainland of Europe and Ireland, in turn, is an island off the west coast of the UK. Brexit gives rise to many issues that affect us.

Ireland is not located at the geographic centre of the European Union but at its outer perimeter. This issue has come into focus in recent days, as the ambassador will realise, as a result of the European Commission's decision in the Apple case. Ireland strongly resents the attitude taken by the Commission in this case. If applied broadly throughout the European Union in respect of other issues affecting different member states in a different fashion, the Commission's approach would have serious implications for solidarity in the European Union. Solidarity is a concept that the EU has embodied and one which was very much incorporated in the ambassador's address to the joint committee. Everybody has something to contribute to the European Union, whereas the tendency nowadays is to view the EU as an entity from which everybody should extract something. We must return to the precept whereby every country brings something to the table and makes a commitment to the EU, as a result of which the sum becomes much greater than its parts. I hope the Slovak Presidency will be successful in the pursuit of this objective.

The ambassador referred to bureaucrats, administrators and so forth. We have the height of respect for bureaucrats from time to time. When they err, in our opinion however, we believe we have the right to fundamentally reject what they have to say.

For 20 years, I have heard about the abolition of roaming charges. It was a major issue in the European Union 20 years ago and its resolution was imminent then. It still has not been resolved, much to the chagrin of all member states. People roaming with their mobile telephones within the Union are penalised when making calls or downloading data. As we well know, there is no need for this. The benefit of being in a Union is that one avails of the services provided collectively by the Union. It stretches the imagination as to why this issue has not been resolved.

Technology is going to be significantly important in combatting crime in the future. We have seen countless examples of modern criminality and crime bosses who do not have problems with roaming at all. They seem to expand and improve their influences, as well as commit atrocities, as time goes by. We get affected by them, as do other countries in the Union. Some of our criminals have domiciled themselves in other European countries as well, much to our annoyance.

We all have fond memories of Slovakia's accession to the European Union. It has made a positive contribution since. In recent times, there have been some discordant notes from various Heads of State across the Union on various issues, predominantly on migration. They need to be resolved. If we cannot live together as a Union, we should not be together. It would be utterly hypocritical on our part to attempt to pursue the objectives of a Union if we are not thinking as one.

We have all heard from time to time the fact that the Members of Parliament of each member state should expect to have a greater influence on the Union in the future. That is a contradiction and I cannot see how it can happen. If each of the 27 member states insisted on ensuring their policies apply throughout the Union, there would be conflict. There cannot be agreement if that were to happen. This is why it is important that the contribution each member state has to bring to the Union has to be such as is part of the Union's own objectives.

I noted the oblique reference to continuing discussions with the western Balkans on enlargement. Many argue we do not need any more enlargement. We cannot divorce ourselves from reality. It is important this area achieves Union membership in the shortest possible time.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I welcome the ambassador to the committee and thank him for his comprehensive presentation. I too feel the six-month term for an EU Presidency is too short. If I were to be cynical, I would think it is a term dreamed up by bureaucrats to ensure politicians would never get to actually control the Union. The ambassador referred to the rise of populism and I agree with him on that. Unlike my colleague Deputy Bernard J. Durkan, I believe we are now reaching the stage of diminishing marginal returns in terms of expansion of an economic community. As we get larger, we will start to amplify the differences between us rather than the commonality that holds us together. I have serious concerns about that.

Given Brexit and the rise of populism, I am somewhat disappointed Slovakia has not decided to set aside all these grand plans and deal with one issue. The one issue I would like the Slovakian Presidency to deal with is bringing the European Union back to its citizens. There is clearly a terrible disjoint between where the Union is going. Although there are benefits, they are fleeting and people forget them. We look at our road infrastructure in this country which has changed beyond recognition over the past 15 years. People forget, however, that European money funded these projects and our education system.

Instead, Irish people concentrate on the fact that we feel we singularly carried the burden for the economic collapse of Europe. Whether that is true or not, it does not matter. It feeds into the populist view of what the European Community is about. We deeply resent the Commission sticking its nose into our affairs, trying to twist our arms into breaking our corporate tax regime. Whether that is true or not, again this has fed into the populist view which exists. The ambassador referred to natural resources and, in particular, water. When he drafted his speech, he could not have been unaware of the sensitivity of the whole water debate in this country. In this regard, there are people in Ireland who again feel the bureaucrats of Europe are deciding how we will manage our natural resources. I believe we will have to pay to manage our national resources. How we do that is a matter that has yet to be decided.

During its EU Presidency, Slovakia should set aside priorities such as the digital economy and the expansion of the Union and do nothing else but bring the Union back to the people and get the ordinary citizen on the street to recognise the benefits of being part of Europe. It is my view that we are on the cusp of a complete breakup of the European project. It was an excellent project from the outset. However, Deputy Bernard J. Durkan referred to the differences in it. We cannot have differences; we need to have common ground. Maybe we are trying too many things at the one time. Maybe we need to close things down and come back to the basics.

I wish Slovakia well in its first EU Presidency and hope we hear many positive developments over the next coming months.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I thank the ambassador for his comprehensive address and outlining a vision for the European Union, which is sadly lacking. He said himself unity and optimism is lacking in Europe, using a poem by Seamus Heaney.

The ambassador will be under no illusion but that the Brexit issue is the most important issue facing the Government and citizens of the Republic of Ireland. While appreciating Article 50 of the Lisbon treaty has not yet been invoked, Oireachtas Members are clear we need to get the message out that Ireland is particularly affected by Brexit, probably more than any other EU member state. While every EU member state will be affected in one way or other from the point of view of trade and so forth, Ireland has concerns about the future of the common travel area, the possible erection of trade barriers between the UK and the Republic of Ireland and the possible introduction of cross-Border controls. The most important, but least tangible, concern

is about the sustainability of the peace process in Northern Ireland. In any meetings I have had in the European Union in recent months there is a great interest among our colleagues and MEPs in the European Parliament about the peace process and how it might be affected. This is something we need to get across, that if there is poor economic growth in Northern Ireland it could lead to all sorts of problems and issues.

With regard to the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, between the EU and Canada, I understand that the foreign ministers are meeting shortly to consider that further. It has been suggested that the meeting might give provisional approval for CETA and I would be concerned about that because it has not really been discussed in our national Parliament. It would be a mistake to go ahead with provisional approval of CETA at the September meeting.

The ambassador also stressed the position regarding migration and asylum policy. This is one of the big issues which faces Europe today. The EU-Turkey deal is now being implemented and there are concerns about how that is being implemented and also about the consequent EU migration partnership framework. There is a general view among many people in Ireland that the security concerns are taking priority over humanitarian concerns. I believe the European Union needs to stress the humanitarian considerations in all of this, apart from the other issues. All of the speakers, including the ambassador, spoke about the democratic deficit. The ambassador spoke about the gap in communication between EU institutions, member states and the citizens. I believe it is painfully obvious to all that something needs to be done on that. Senator Craughwell referred to the rise of populism. The European Union is under threat and we need to be conscious of that.

The ambassador has set himself a very ambitious agenda. He has come at a very difficult time for the European Union with its many challenges. Certainly, as another small state, we wish him well in his endeavours for the benefit of all the citizens of Europe.

Chairman: I invite Senator Paul Coghlan to speak. I should point out to the ambassador that Senator Coghlan is the only man who had the good sense to wear the ambassador's tie here today.

Senator Paul Coghlan: As has been said, I welcome His Excellency and I congratulate him on his ambassadorial role. I wish his country very well with the EU Council Presidency and I support what my colleagues have said on the issues. We held some discussion about Brexit before the ambassador came to the committee today, something which will undoubtedly be the predominant issue for Ireland. There has been talk at the committee about the democratic deficit and that unity and optimism are very difficult to achieve because of narrow populism and human nature which can be selfish. I will not go into what we thought about the British decision, even though it was narrowly achieved, but it is the dominant matter for us. We would hope for the support of the smaller countries and particularly of Slovakia as the President of the EU Council, even though I do not believe it will arise for quite a long time and this uncertainty will continue. Britain has declared that it will not invoke Article 50 for quite some time, maybe even not for a few years.

There are three main issues for Ireland. We do not want a hard Border in our country because of the free movement of our people North and South and our peace process, as Deputy Haughey has said. All the arrangements Ireland has predate not just the European Union but also the EEC. I hope there will be agreement on that matter. Our trade links with Britain mean the biggest difficulty for Ireland will be achieving something that is as close to the Single Market for Britain as is possible. To achieve that they might have to accept a quota on the migratory

front which they do not seem to want to accept. There are a lot of difficulties and there is no point in getting into them today. We wish the ambassador very well and hope for his support when it will matter and count.

Chairman: I thank the ambassador for attending today and for the very interesting presentation and discussion. We wish him well and continued good luck and success during the busy period of the Slovak Presidency of the EU Council. I agree with his own sentiments, and with those of others, that the time is obviously very short. I recall the time Ireland held the EU Council Presidency. One is only getting ones legs under the table and getting going when all of a sudden one has to depart from the table. It is most unfortunate and may perhaps be looked at in the future. We wish the ambassador well. The good side to the Presidency being condensed into a six-month period is that people really knuckle down to work quickly to get going and interact with all the member states. On a personal level I wish His Excellency every good luck and success.

I thank all the Members who came to the Public Gallery today to hear the ambassador's presentation. I especially acknowledge the presence of the chargé d'affaires for Georgia, Mr. George Zurobashvili. I welcome him, his colleagues and all the others here today. I thank them all for being here. I thank the members of the committee and I thank the secretariat for organising today's meeting. As there is no other business to be dealt with today, this meeting shall adjourn until Tuesday, 4 October, or perhaps an alternative date, taking into account what a number of members from the Fianna Fáil group have outlined to us earlier today. It will be taken into account and we will try to deal with that.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Would it be advisable to invite the ambassador to make some closing remarks?

Chairman: I invite the ambassador.

H.E. Mr. Dušan Matulay: Absolutely, I can reflect on the comments.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Chairman.

H.E. Mr. Dušan Matulay: I thank the Chairman for his invaluable comments which I will pass on to Bratislava. Taking all the comments together, the main topic is Brexit. The negative outcome of the referendum is a reality and we need to deal with it. It is the first withdrawal of a member state from the European Union and it is certainly an unprecedented moment. However, it should also give us the opportunity to ask the question why our citizens are withdrawing their trust in the EU. In our view and in the view of Slovakia, there is no alternative. We hope the Bratislava summit will be an event to kick off a wider political reflection to evaluate the current state of play of the integration project and the future of Europe. The reflection process should continue throughout the next European Council meetings and culminate in March 2017 when we will commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. The Bratislava summit should provide an impetus for further thinking and, more particularly, for action. The event should be built around the idea of sending a firm signal of the unity of member states, which was also mentioned in several contributions by Senators and Deputies. We expect from the summit a diagnosis of the current state of the EU which, after the UK referendum, is now in a specific situation. We also expect agreement on a limited list of priority areas that will receive particular attention over the next month. We believe it is necessary that the leaders have an informal political debate on the current state of the EU after the UK referendum where they can exchange their views on the situation, its causes and consequences.

In the case of Ireland we clearly see that Ireland has a unique position because of the closeness and the shared history, and that has been amplified in the committee members' statements. Ireland is the only country that has a land border with the UK. We all see this. Slovakia, as a smaller country also, has a lot of understanding for the Irish voice in this debate. It is important to stress that we would not like the upcoming reflection to be only about discussion on more or less Europe, nor about changing the treaty and transfer of powers between Brussels and member states. This reflection should aim at delivering better results for the citizens. Senator Craughwell referred to bringing the EU closer to the citizens and how that might be done. Concrete projects such as the digital Single Market can eventually bring this closer.

Deputy Durkan mentioned that roaming charges would be abolished four years from now, but they have certainly decreased. They are currently on the lowest level and we can see light at the end of the tunnel. Concrete projects that we will be able to achieve include those in the digital area and the capital markets union. The latter is a unique instrument which can bring clear benefits specifically to small and medium-sized enterprises.

Deputy Haughey mentioned that Ireland was particularly affected and that this fact should be recognised by member states. It certainly should be, because the EU is a very wide geographic entity. What seems to be an extremely important problem in Slovakia may not be such a huge one here in Ireland, or *vice versa*. In that sense, therefore, we need to have much more understanding of each other. We should also be able to listen to each other and reflect on our partners' concerns. I specifically want to stress the fact that we are a smaller country. I am not saying that small countries should gang up against the big ones, but there is certainly more understanding and sympathy for each other in this regard.

Chairman: I thank Ambassador Matulay and everyone else who participated in this discussion.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.02 p.m. until 5 p.m. on Tuesday, 4 October 2016.