



## Statement by the Taoiseach Mr. Enda Kenny TD on the outcome of the European Council in Brussels on the 20 and 21 October 2016; Dáil Éireann, 26 October 2016

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A Cheann Comhairle,

The meeting of the European Council which took place last Thursday and Friday dealt with several issues of importance to the Union.

It began on Thursday afternoon with a substantial discussion about the complex issue of migration, which remains – quite rightly – a priority for the Union. The evening session focused predominantly on external relations - specifically the situation in Syria and our strategic relationship with Russia. On Friday, we discussed a number of trade issues, including the proposed comprehensive economic and trade agreement with Canada, commonly called CETA; as well as TTIP; the EU-Japan Free Trade Agreement; trade defence instruments, and more broadly, EU trade policy. A range of other global and economic issues were also agreed, as set out in the European Council Conclusions.

In addition to the formal agenda, there were three substantive information points:

- An update from Prime Minister Rutte on developments in the Netherlands since the referendum there on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Ukraine; as well as on developments in relation to the MH17 investigations;
- A presentation by Prime Minister Fico on follow-up to the roadmap agreed at the Bratislava Summit in September, which set out a plan for future work in relation to the renewal of Europe; and
- A brief intervention from Prime Minister May on developments in relation to Brexit.

I have asked Minister Murphy to touch upon elements of the Russia discussion in his wrap-up remarks. I will address the other agenda items: however, I would like to start by updating you on Prime Minister May's intervention as I know the EU-UK relationship is of particular interest to this House.

A Cheann Comhairle,

This was Theresa May's first meeting of the European Council since becoming UK Prime Minister and Donald Tusk, as President, welcomed her to the meeting.

In her remarks, the Prime Minister confirmed that the UK decision to leave the EU is irreversible, and that it will trigger Article 50 by the end of March 2017. She was very clear that, until the Article 50 negotiations are concluded, the UK intends to remain a full and active member of the Union, and to fulfil all its obligations and responsibilities as a Member State. As envisaged, there was no discussion of the issue at this meeting.

However, President Tusk took the opportunity to reiterate the principles agreed by the 27 EU Heads of State and Government in June - that there will be no negotiations until Article 50 is triggered by the UK, and that access to the Single Market is linked to acceptance of the four freedoms.

I had informal exchanges with a number of my EU counterparts, including Prime Minister May, as well as Commission President Juncker, in the margins of the meeting. During those exchanges, I emphasised – as I do at every opportunity - Ireland's very particular concerns arising from Brexit, specifically in relation to Northern Ireland, the peace process, and citizenship issues; the Common Travel Area and border issues; and the inter-connectedness of our economies.

A Cheann Comhairle,

Responding to the migration crisis, effectively and humanely, remains – quite rightly – a top priority for the Union. Clearly, many problems remain, particularly in the Central Mediterranean. However significant progress has been made, for example in managing the inflow of irregular migrants through our relations with third countries.

At the meeting on Thursday, the Commission gave a detailed presentation on the latest developments, and progress on the various measures already agreed. Many of these are having a positive impact.

Most notable is the significant decrease in the number of people travelling the Eastern Mediterranean route, where there has been a 98% drop in arrivals since the EU-Turkey Statement was agreed in March. There was a constructive discussion about restoring the Schengen Agreement because of this progress. Although Ireland does not participate in Schengen, we recognise its value to the EU overall and we are supportive of the progress here.

There was also a presentation by High Representative Mogherini on the 'Migration Compacts' - these are proposed agreements between the EU and third countries, as part of the Commission's Partnership Framework. These Compacts are borne out of the understanding that we have to address the root causes of the migration crisis and not just its effects, and aim at bringing coherence between external policies and development policies.

They are being developed with a number of African countries in the first instance: Ireland is particularly involved in discussions about Ethiopia, which is a key partner of Irish Aid. In this context, Ireland is also a supporter of progress on the External Investment Plan in order to boost investments and job creation in the partner countries.

Despite our position on the far western edge of Europe, and our non-participation in certain Justice and Home Affairs measures under Protocol 21 of the Treaties, we continue to contribute to the EU response to the challenges posed by migration.

Our naval vessels have been assisting operations in the central Mediterranean since May 2015 and, in that time, have rescued over 14,300 migrants. L.É. Samuel Beckett began patrols on 2 October and continues to play a vital role in the effort to save lives, including by acting as coordinator for other ships, as well as directly rescuing migrants.

Once again, I want to commend the service which the members of our defence forces are providing. They are a credit to our flag and our nation and we thank them for their service.

We are also playing our part in terms of our humanitarian assistance: we have provided over €42 million in response to the Syria crisis since 2011, and we have pledged a further €20 million in 2016.

It is also important to recall the Government's decision to opt-in to the EU measures on resettlement and relocation and to take up to 4,000 people in need of international protection. There has been good progress on the resettlement of refugees from outside the Union.

To date, 500 have arrived in Ireland and we are on course to meet our 2016 target of 520 by the end of the year. There is no facility for taking refugees directly from within Syria.

We are working with the UNHCR-led programme, which is currently focused on resettling refugees from the camps in Lebanon, and the programme is moving ahead. The Government has announced that we will admit an additional 260 refugees on resettlement from Lebanon next spring, and a further pledge for 2017 is under active consideration.

On relocation – that is, taking asylum seekers who have already arrived in Greece and Italy - progress has been slow. This has been the case for all partners, for a variety of reasons outside of our control. However, progress is at last beginning to be made and 69 people have now come to Ireland from Greece. We are building on this progress and it is anticipated that, by the end of the year, Ireland will have accepted up to 400 people through the relocation pledge. The intention thereafter is to sustain the pace of intakes throughout 2017 at the levels required to allow Ireland to meet its commitments within the time frame envisaged by the Programme.

A Cheann Comhairle,

The migration crisis is of course born out of instability across the North African and Middle East regions and, in that regard, the horrendous war in Syria remains a central factor. There was a lengthy discussion about the situation there, and the European Council was unanimous in its condemnation of the attacks by Syria and its allies, notably Russia, on Aleppo.

We called for these atrocities to end, for unhindered humanitarian access to be provided, and for the resumption of a credible political process under UN auspices.

The European Council was also united in its assertion that accountability for breaches of international humanitarian law must be upheld. All options will be under consideration should the current atrocities continue. That of course includes sanctions if necessary, and Ireland fully supports this position.

A Cheann Comhairle,

There was considerable interest in the European Council discussions on trade. Our debate in this House last week heard a number of forceful interventions, in particular on the question of the provisional application of those elements of the CETA agreement which fall within the competence of the European Union. This was also the focus of media coverage last week as intense negotiations continued between the European Commission, the Canadian delegation, the Belgian Prime Minister, and the Walloon Minister-President.

I appreciate that there are differing views in the Dáil on matters of political philosophy, and I welcome this spectrum of opinion. However, I want to be clear that Ireland, with one of the most open economies in the world, has been a beneficiary of free trade. This openness is one of the reasons why international companies locate here and why Irish companies, particularly SMEs, do so well exporting and trading on the international stage.

The government, while watchful of our own interests, continues to support free trade agreements where the substance and the detail are right. From Ireland's perspective, the discussions on trade at the European Council were probably the most significant. EU leaders agreed on the importance of trade in creating jobs, growth and investment, and on the need to respond to today's challenges with an outward-looking and balanced trade policy.

Let me emphasise again that, on CETA, Ireland was among a group of Member States that, earlier, successfully sought its designation as a mixed agreement. This means that only those elements of the agreement which fall within the competency of the EU would come into force upon provisional signature. Those elements which fall to national competency would not be in force until national parliaments, including the Dáil, vote to allow that to happen. The Government, along with others, insisted on this for legal reasons.

Furthermore, the investment protection provisions have been specifically carved out from provisional application which means that they will be implemented only when the Dáil has voted for them.

We fully support the provisional application of CETA at the earliest opportunity. When it is signed, there will be an accompanying interpretative declaration clarifying that CETA will not affect public services, labour rights or environmental protection. It is still hoped that the agreement can be signed at the EU-Canada Summit on 27 October; the European Parliament would then be expected to give its approval in December.

The prospects for finalising the TTIP agreement with the US are of course more difficult. Any progress on this will have to await the US Presidential election. Nevertheless, we continue to call for as much progress as possible in the negotiations, so as to keep momentum towards an ambitious, comprehensive and mutually beneficial agreement.

More generally, the European Council also discussed EU trade defence instruments. These have come to the fore due to a variety of global trade factors, and particularly in light of pressure in the steel sector. I intervened on this broader question of tackling unfair practices, and I stressed the need to ensure that any policies which are designed to help the few do not harm the overall competitiveness of EU industry. This is particularly important for a small, open economy like Ireland, which is dependent on importing products.

We do of course however recognise that unfair trade practices need to be tackled efficiently and robustly and we have been engaging pragmatically on this item.

A Cheann Comhairle,

As I said at the outset, the European Council addressed a wide range of issues of importance to the Union and to Ireland.

In his wrap-up statement, Minister Murphy will address the discussions that focused more broadly on our strategic relationship with Russia.

I look forward now however to hearing the statements from Deputies.

Thank you.

ENDS

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