

Report by President Donald Tusk to the European Parliament on March European Council meetings

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Introductory remarks

Let me brief you on the outcome of the March European Council, where leaders tackled a number of issues, ranging from Russia and Turkey to trade, taxation and, of course, Brexit.

The European Council agreed with the UK Government's assessment that it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible for the nerve agent attack in Salisbury. We expressed full solidarity with the United Kingdom by condemning this attack and as a response many leaders decided to expel Russian diplomats. The EU ambassador to Moscow was recalled for consultations.

Speaking about Russia, I should mention last weekend's targeted airstrikes by France, the United Kingdom and the United States against Syrian chemical weapons facilities. The use of chemical weapons, anywhere in the world, must not become normalised. Nor can it be without consequences. The airstrikes were necessary and proportionate to deter further use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime to kill its own people. It is urgent that all parties in Syria engage in the UN-led political process to end this tragedy. Above all, Russia and Iran should stop playing games and seriously engage in finding a responsible and peaceful solution.

The European Council discussed trade and called for a permanent EU exemption from the US tariffs on steel and aluminium. We strongly supported the steps taken by the European Commission to ensure that the interests of the Union are fully protected. In case there is no permanent exemption for the EU, we will have no choice but to react. We wish to avoid this route, which is why I called for a dialogue that will bring more trade between the US and the EU, not less. Free and fair trade is one of the most powerful engines for growth and jobs, and we should make full use of it. It is simply in everyone's interest.

Leaders also discussed the digital economy, which is a great opportunity, but also a challenge for tax systems. There was a clear understanding that we need to make our tax systems fit for the digital era. A global tax regime

would certainly be most welcome, but many felt that it would take too much time to prepare. The discussion confirmed the leaders' desire to work towards an effective and fair solution among EU Member States.

In the context of the digital economy, we also discussed recent revelations related to Facebook and Cambridge Analytica. The European Council called on social networks and digital platforms to guarantee transparent practices and full protection of citizens' privacy and personal data. EU and national legislation must be respected and enforced. This important matter, together with other issues relating to Digital Europe, will be discussed by the leaders at the informal meeting in Sofia in May.

During the Euro Summit, leaders exchanged views on long term challenges ahead of the EMU. The EU economy is back to pre-crisis growth rates, which makes this a very good time to reflect strategically on our ambitions. Many of the themes we discussed – like a fiscal capacity for the euro area – are difficult, but I see avenues to be explored. As we agreed in December, the most urgent political priority remains strengthening the Banking Union and further developing the ESM. This remains my goal, even though I am not a blind optimist. In June we will aim to take a first set of decisions and provide additional guidance on the way forward.

On Brexit. The EU27 adopted guidelines for the future EU-UK relationship and welcomed the progress made on the Withdrawal Agreement. We want to use the positive momentum in these negotiations to finally settle outstanding issues such as the solution to avoid a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The UK's decision on Brexit has caused the problem, and the UK will have to help solve it. Without a solution, there will be no withdrawal agreement and no transition. Leaders will assess the negotiations in June. In parallel, we will start our first talks about the future EU-UK relationship.

Finally, on Turkey. Despite many controversies, we agreed that the EU-Turkey meeting should go ahead. I met President Erdoğan in Varna, together with Jean-Claude (Juncker) and Prime Minister Borissov. We took stock of where things now stand in our relationship and set out some parameters for the future. We expressed clearly different views on democratic standards, Turkey's involvement in Syria and its illegal actions in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the Aegean Sea. However, we decided to keep the lines of communication open. We will also continue to work closely together on issues such as migration and terrorism.

Before concluding let me say a few words about the Western Balkans, where I will travel next week to prepare EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia on 17 May. The message to our friends is clear: the European Union is and will continue to be the most reliable partner for the entire region. As the biggest investor, the biggest donor, the biggest trading market and the best promise for a better future for citizens. Our summit should reaffirm the European perspective of the region. And more importantly, it should improve, in concrete terms, connections with and within the region. Thank you.

Closing remarks

First, the European Commission is in dialogue with the Polish government, as you know, and everybody is hoping, at least I am hoping for positive changes in Poland and Polish legislation. This is why I don't foresee for now a discussion at the European Council on this issue in June. I trust the Commission here.

I feel shocked but, for the first time, I must agree with Mr. Farage. You are right, Mr. Farage, Brexit will not bring any good to anyone.

Mr. Kamall has said that free trade with Japan and Singapore is one of the priorities and that we should treat in the same way free trade with the UK, I mean our future free trade agreement with the UK. The only problem is that we are strengthening and easing trade and other relations with Japan and Singapore, while Brexit is by nature, by definition, about weakening and worsening trade and everything else. This is why I think it's difficult to compare these two different issues.

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