

## Address by President Donald Tusk to the European Committee of the Regions

It is a real honour and pleasure to be here again at the Committee of the Regions. As I said during my last visit here, I am a true believer in the mission of this institution. Your members are important ambassadors for Europe to the political grassroots, closest to ordinary citizens, and your *fingerspitzengefühl* for the concerns of local communities helps to keep European policy-making firmly rooted in reality. Europe's self-confidence and well-being depend on the vitality of our cities, regions and municipalities, which is reflected in the Committee's agenda during this *Week of Regions and Cities*.

We last met 18 months ago, and much has happened since then. At the time, the European Council was working hard to end the most serious migration crisis Europe has ever faced, and also to prevent the exit of one of our largest Member States. As regards the first issue, we have been able to achieve a lot. By ordering the closure of the Western Balkan route and improving our cooperation with Turkey, the flows of irregular migrants on this path to Europe were stemmed by 98 per cent. However, on the second issue, we have unfortunately not been as successful. On June 23, Britain voted for Brexit. Immediately after the result, I told the media what my father used to tell me: "what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger." Thankfully, this is what has happened. But it did not happen automatically, it took much effort.

Britain's referendum campaign was full of false arguments and unacceptable generalisations. But it would have been a big mistake to interpret the negative result exclusively as a symptom of British exceptionalism and Euroscepticism, because all over Europe, even moderate voters were asking "Is the European Union the answer to problems of instability and insecurity, or is it now standing in the way?" To find a clear answer to this question, at my invitation, the leaders met as a community of 27 in Bratislava in September 2016. The result was the Bratislava Roadmap, which was a set of specific, realistic commitments, carefully tailored to voters' real concerns. On migration, security, the economy and climate. More than this, we needed to move to close the gap between discussing issues and delivering results. Leaders agreed that momentum must be clear on all issues by the 60th anniversary celebrations of the Treaties of Rome in March, with a number of strict deadlines set for key legislation.

The progress we have made since Bratislava didn't come easily. To the contrary, each achievement was a tough battle on the way to restoring public confidence. Let me give some of the most important examples. In the first place, leaders promised never again to allow a return to the uncontrolled migration flows of 2015. As a result, the new European Border and Coast Guard was declared operational in December last year, and help was given to Greece, where over 1,000 European border guards are present. In addition, we have started providing financial assistance to refugees in Turkey. Likewise, earlier this year, after leaders agreed to close the Central Mediterranean route, our effort to train and equip the Libyan coastguard has led to a sharp drop in arrivals to Italy.

On climate: the entry into force in November 2016 of the Paris Climate Change Agreement thanks to EU efforts was a significant boost to our morale. More importantly, it also demonstrated Europe's continued leadership on the global stage. We have been clear since then, also to the new US administration, that the agreement must be implemented and cannot be renegotiated. The EU is now working to fulfil the commitments from Paris, both internally and globally, together with key countries such as India and China.

Europe continues to be a global leader in free and fair trade. A month after Bratislava, we signed the CETA agreement with Canada, and in July this year, a political agreement on an EU-Japan free trade deal. In doing so, we kept our promise to the public at Bratislava to give Europe the power to defend our citizens from unfair trading practices. As you know, new robust trade defence instruments were agreed last week, after months of tough debate. While our ambitious programme of trade expansion continues, we will not hesitate to use these new tools against trade hooligans.

Security was also, rightly, one of citizens' major concerns. We live in an increasingly unstable world, where terrorism, geo-political tension and cyber-attacks threaten our safety and interests on a daily basis. While the European Union's contribution to peace, conflict resolution and humanitarian efforts is globally recognised, we cannot ignore the continued presence of hard power in the world and, indeed, around our own borders. This is why Europe must be even more united, capable of defending itself, and responsive to threats such as hybrid war. To this end, leaders have since Bratislava committed to serious defence cooperation, and begun using the EU's leverage to confront Islamist radicalisation on social media. We have also maintained the pressure to create, modernise and link EU databases needed for border security.

Over the past year, two other developments have brought fresh hope in the European idea. Firstly, our conduct in the Brexit talks has shown the European Union at its best: in terms of unity, political solidarity and fairness towards the United Kingdom, from drafting the EU guidelines to the negotiations themselves. And secondly, the European economy has woken up. Few economic observers would have predicted a year ago that average GDP growth in the European Union would be 2 per cent; that the eurozone would be recording its fastest rate of growth since 2011; or that the common currency would be enjoying the highest levels of popular support in over a decade. Unemployment has now fallen below 8 per cent. Leaders will now discuss the future of our Economic and Monetary Union at the Euro Summit in December.

Denis de Rougemont, the Swiss philosopher whom I referred to last time I was here, once said: "the knowledge of true danger may cure us of false fears". That is what has happened in Europe since we started work on the Bratislava agenda. Europe has got its act together, but given the challenges we face, we cannot be complacent. It is for this reason that at the summit in Tallinn two weeks ago, European leaders discussed how to speed up decision-making at the European level, but above all, how to maintain our unity at 27. I was also given the mandate to develop the Leaders' Agenda for the next two years. I am now in the middle of these consultations, whose main aim is to provide real solutions to real issues of concern for our citizens, *inter alia* unemployment, irregular migration, fears connected with globalisation, and, of course, still Brexit. Here I would like to refer to Prime Minister Theresa May's recent words. We hear from London that the UK government is preparing for a "no deal" scenario. I would like to say very clearly that the EU is not working on such a scenario. We are negotiating in good faith, and we still hope that the so-called "sufficient progress" will be possible by December. However, if it turns out that the talks continue at a slow pace, and that "sufficient progress" hasn't been reached, then - together with our UK friends - we will have to think about where we are heading.

Going back to the Leaders' Agenda for the next two years, your contribution is also very important, and I will pay close attention to it. Last year, I wrote to your President, asking the European Committee of the Regions to start a reflection on Europe, so that the voice of regional and local authorities is heard. I understand that already 100 meetings have been held around Europe to prepare this initiative. I can only thank you for your generous response to this challenge, and I look forward to the results with great interest.

Before you start the debate, allow me - at this extraordinary time for Catalonia and the whole of Spain - to address in your presence the President of the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, Mr Carles Puigdemont, shortly before his speech. I appeal to you not only as the President of the European Council, but also as a strong believer in the motto of the EU: "United in diversity", as a member of an ethnic minority and a regionalist, as a man who knows what it feels like to be hit by a police baton. And as a former prime minister of a big European country. In brief, as someone who understands and feels the arguments and emotions of all sides.

A few days ago, I asked Prime Minister Rajoy to look for a solution to the problem without the use of force. To look for dialogue. Because the force of arguments is always better than the argument of force. Today I ask you to respect - in your intentions - the constitutional order and not to announce a decision that would make such a dialogue impossible. Diversity should not, and need not, lead to conflict, whose consequences would obviously be bad: for the Catalans, for Spain and for the whole of Europe. Let us always look for what unites us, and not for what divides us. This is what will decide the future of our continent.

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