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Speech by the President of Parliament, Antonio TAJANI, at the European Council meeting on 29 April 2017

Mr President, Heads of State and Government, Mr President of the Commission,

Today the European Council has the task of agreeing on guidelines for the negotiations on the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Union, negotiations which will begin shortly. The preparations, which also involved Members of the European Parliament, immediately showed that the 27 other Member States and the EU institutions were united in their intentions and in their approach to the negotiations.

As you know, that sense of unity also manifested itself in the proceedings in Parliament, and led to the very prompt adoption by an overwhelming majority of a resolution with whose substance you are familiar and which you endorse in large part.

I should like to thank the President of the European Council, the Maltese Presidency and the Commission for fostering an excellent spirit of cooperation among the institutions during this first, delicate phase of the Brexit process.

I believe that the guidelines which the European Council is preparing to adopt constitute an excellent frame of reference for the forthcoming negotiations and the ideal basis for an orderly withdrawal from the Union on the part of the United Kingdom, a prerequisite for, and the best guarantee of, a sound post-Brexit agreement.

For Parliament, 'orderly withdrawal' means above all finding a solution quickly to the problem of the EU citizens resident in the United Kingdom and the British citizens resident in the EU. This is our absolute priority. It is essential that the problems which Brexit will create and is already creating, for these workers, students and pensioners, should be resolved in the very first stages of the negotiations.

Last week I travelled to London to meet Mrs May. During my visit I also held talks with the associations which represent the 3 million EU citizens living in the United Kingdom. Most of the people I spoke to were young, and they gave eloquent voice to their fears for the future and their feelings of uncertainty in the face of recent developments. They want to know what the repercussions will be, for their lives, for their families, for their jobs. They are placing their hopes in us and **strongly** asking for our help.

An 'orderly withdrawal' also means 'closing the accounts'. As regards the financial settlement, Parliament is adamant that the United Kingdom must honour all the financial commitments entered into by the British Government. *Pacta sunt servanda*. We will not ask for a penny more than what has been pledged ... and not a penny less.

Parliament has also made it very clear that it regards the four fundamental freedoms as indivisible - they are not negotiable, because they constitute the very foundation of our Union. For us, the internal market is much more than just trade in goods and services.

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Parliament's resolution ends by strongly emphasising the need to safeguard all the elements of the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland peace process, which is not solely an Irish matter, but a profoundly European one. The challenge will be to find appropriate solutions to the problem of the Union's future external borders.

I am delighted that there should be such a broad measure of convergence between Parliament's resolution and the guidelines which you will adopt today and I should like to thank you for being so receptive to our views.

I believe also that the idea of having 'flexible' guidelines is a good one. This will enable us to adapt our strategy to developments in the negotiations.

If necessary, Parliament will also adopt further resolutions during the negotiations. In those resolutions, it will, for example, give its assessment as to whether the 'substantial progress' in the negotiations on a Brexit agreement which the guidelines lay down as a precondition for the opening of discussions on future relations between the Union and the United Kingdom has in fact been made.

I should like to tell you something about the meeting I had with Mrs May last week, to which I referred earlier.

The general impression I came away with is that the Prime Minister intends to take a ~~constructive~~, pragmatic approach to the forthcoming negotiations. As I see it, the British elections will confirm that it is the right one.

In particular, Mrs May assured me that the problems faced by ordinary people, which I was at pains to highlight, are also central concerns for the British Government. It remains to be seen how these good intentions are put into practice.

I made it absolutely clear that without an agreement on the rights of citizens there will be no agreement at all **and the EP will vote against.**

For my part, I emphasised that we will not accept any trade-offs between future economic and trade cooperation and cooperation in the area of defence and security, because Brexit is an irrelevance to terrorists and it would be in nobody's interests to weaken our cooperation in this area.

I was reassured by what Ms May had to say on this subject.

For your information, I also invited her to attend a forthcoming part-session of Parliament **if she is elected as she probably will be.**

Ladies and Gentlemen, in my country we have a saying: 'well begun, half done', and there is no doubt that we have begun well. ~~Therefore, there is good reason to be optimistic.~~

We are of course aware that the negotiations facing us will be difficult. Brexit will be a challenge not just for the United Kingdom, but most definitely for us as well.

In a few months' time, perhaps, one Member State or other may be tempted to put its national interests first. We will perhaps face pressure designed to create divisions among us on one issue or another in the negotiations.

We must be very watchful, however, because the danger of division will never be far away and, as a Roman, I am all too familiar with the consequences of 'divide and rule'.

There will be difficult moments. Nevertheless, I am convinced that ultimately we will show the unity which the institutions and Member States have displayed at every difficult stage in our joint European project.

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Unity will be our strength and our greatest asset. Our peoples (citizens) have placed their hopes in us. They are looking to us to defend their interests and to show that we are up to the task which we have been given.

Parliament's view is that the negotiations must be conducted as openly as possible. We must take the opportunity they offer to demonstrate to European citizens the many benefits which EU membership brings, benefits which are too often taken for granted and of which our citizens may not even be aware. **I don't think that even the British citizens are aware what they are going to lose the day the UK leaves the Union. I was asked by the BBC about the 10.000 staff in the agencies. It is not out problem it is the UK's. And obviously the agencies need to remain in the EU and cannot go to New York for example.**

The results of the latest Eurobarometer survey were published yesterday. They show that public feelings of belonging to the Union are back at the levels they were in 2007, prior to the crisis. According to the statistics, people in all the Member States want to see greater unity among the 27 and are calling for 'more Europe', in particular in the areas which they regard as most important, such as the fight against terrorism, migration, the protection of the Union's external borders and measures to combat unemployment. Against the backdrop of Brexit, this is very encouraging. **Data revealed yesterday show that people in the UK are beginning to regret their decision for the first time.**

As its President, I can assure you that Parliament will approach the negotiations in a spirit of sincere cooperation and it will be standing alongside you every step of the way, standing alongside the Commission and the chief negotiator Michel Barnier, who we regard as 'the right man in the right place' and to whom we will give our full support. **I worked with him side by side in the commission for over five years and I give him my personal support and assistance whenever he needs it.**

Mrs May, quite rightly, wants to make Brexit a success, and I should like to conclude by saying that we must seek to do the same. It will not simply be a matter of minimising the drawbacks of Brexit, but also of exploiting its benefits, of which there will inevitably be some. **If the data of the surveys are right people are realizing that leaving might cause them some harm.** It is up to us to make a virtue out of necessity and I am convinced that, together, we can do so. Today I am optimistic.

Thank you for your attention.