

Speech by Michel Barnier at the Zeitungskongress 2019

Berlin, 24 September 2019

Ladies and gentlemen,

President, dear **Mathias Döpfner**,

It is an honour for me to speak today at your **Zeitungskongress**.

I would like to open my speech with the theme you have chosen for this year: **'constant change'**.

[MAJOR CHANGES AHEAD]

The only thing constant in life is change. **The world is in constant change** – sometimes for the better, but not always.

- **Technology can bring people together**, enable civil society movements, increase access to news and knowledge.
- And every week, innovative cities like Berlin adopt **new solutions for cleaner mobility and zero energy buildings**.

But **constant change also brings new threats** to which policy makers must respond.

- **Every week we are faced with new, alarming scientific studies on the health of our planet.** The consequences are enormous. We know we need to act on the climate, biodiversity, on micro-plastic pollution in our fields, oceans and food. But the question is the level of ambition: will it be enough? And will it be acceptable to all parts of society?
- **In international relations and trade, the open and rules-based multilateral global order is being seriously undermined.** The threat of trade wars has become the common language of international relations.
- **Throughout the world and at home, our democratic values and the respect for fundamental individual freedoms are increasingly being contested.** Racism and anti-Semitism are on the rise. The appeal of our liberal democratic order has lost its shine.
- **Technology has become almost exclusively American or Chinese.** Out of the top 20 tech companies worldwide, eleven are now American. The remaining nine are Chinese.

New companies bring new opportunities, but the new technologies also raise fundamental questions.

The other day, I read a newspaper article entirely written by artificial intelligence.

What do all these disruptions mean for each of you and for all of us Europeans?

What does it mean for the functioning of our democracies, the future of our industries, jobs, personal data and ethical standards?

When the world is moving forward so fast, Europe cannot afford to look inwards.

We need to continue to stand up for our values, the rule of law, press freedom and human rights.

We must not leave the 21st century to the US and China alone.

In these next decades, even Germany will become a mid-size economy – with a population a third of that of Indonesia.

And that is why we need to collectively act now if we do not want the future of our industries, jobs, personal data and ethical standards to be decided in Washington and in Beijing.

[BREXIT: OUR APPROACH SO FAR]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me know turn to Brexit.

Why is this global picture so important when it comes to Brexit?

Precisely, because Brexit needs to be seen against the backdrop of this *constantly changing* world.

We are living through times where **the need for EU countries to stick together has never been greater.**

And the question is: are we in a better capacity to respond to all these challenges as a union or alone?

Ladies and gentlemen,

No one has yet been able to convince me that there is added value in leaving the EU.

But Brexit was the choice of the UK.

We must respect it.

For the EU, the best way to respect the UK's choice was - from the very beginning – to approach discussions with calmness and serenity and without negative emotions.

And by always keeping our eye on the end destination: a new future relationship with the UK.

Since the beginning, **we have pursued this negotiation with responsibility, honesty and determination.**

Our approach has always been to **work with – not against – British negotiators, also at times when we disagreed strongly.** Our aim has always been to agree together on the terms of the UK's orderly withdrawal.

The agreement that we reached last November with the UK government was – and still is – the result of our work.

The Withdrawal Agreement brings a solution to the main problems created by Brexit:

- For the 4.5 million EU **citizens** living in the UK and British nationals living in the 27 Member States. We agreed to protect their rights.
- For the **beneficiaries** of EU funds. We agreed that whatever was decided at 28 should also be paid at 28.
- For peace and stability in **Ireland.**
- And finally, our deal created the conditions of trust that are necessary to build an ambitious **future relationship**, as outlined in the Political Declaration also agreed in November last year. The future relationship is much more important than the separation.

[BREXIT: TWO STICKING POINTS]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Where are we now?

There are **two sticking points** in the discussions with the current UK government.

1/ First, the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland

Since the beginning of these negotiations, I have **travelled several times to Ireland and Northern Ireland.**

I have listened to students, workers, business owners and politicians from both communities in Northern Ireland and from both sides of the border.

Last year, I visited a rural women's network in Dungannon and they told me about the tragedy of the past. And I still hear their words: ***'Never again!'***

Today, **the people in this region live without the violence of the past.**

This is thanks to a delicate compromise and **significant efforts by many people, British and Irish politicians, and political and civil society leaders in Northern Ireland.**

Their collective determination to turn a page of history eventually led to the conclusion of the **Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement** in 1998, bringing an end to decades of violence on the island.

The EU was not a party to the Good Friday Agreement.

At the same time, **both countries were EU Members and the UK and Ireland's membership of the Single Market and Customs Union created one of the basic conditions for a fully open border.**

Brexit puts this major achievement at risk.

That is why the UK government and the EU had agreed - from the beginning - to avoid the return of a hard border.

This, however, creates challenges for protecting the integrity of our Single Market.

To give a concrete example : any **live animal**, or any **food product**, that enters Northern Ireland coming from Great Britain can enter not only Ireland but also the German, Polish or Danish market. Free movement is what our Single Market is all about.

This is why we need to have controls to protect our consumers, guarantee food safety and to prevent animal diseases.

Therefore, we agreed with the UK on a **'safety net' – what is often referred to as the 'backstop' – that serves three purposes:**

- Avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland;
- Protect the integrity of the EU Single Market, and Ireland's place in it;
- And maintain the 'all-island economy' and North-South cooperation on the island of Ireland, in the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement.

In other words, **the EU agreed to be flexible in terms of our core principles: we have decided to extend the benefits of the Single Market, notably in terms of free movement of goods, to Northern Ireland**, so that we can maintain the current conditions in place for the Good Friday Agreement to work.

Concretely, unless and until we have found another solution to guarantee each of the three objectives, Northern Ireland would **remain aligned to a limited set of EU rules, namely those that are essential for avoiding a hard border**.

This compromise was agreed – and even shaped – by the government of Theresa May.

But, as you know, **the current UK government has asked to remove the backstop**.

Talks with the UK are ongoing.

We are open to examining the UK's ideas and proposals.

But it is **essential for the EU that the Withdrawal Agreement contains a workable, concrete solution - *a legally operative solution* – to the challenges posed by Brexit on the island of Ireland**.

The people living in both parts of the island deserve this legal certainty.

And the citizens in the rest of the EU must be able to rely on the internal market being protected, and food safety and product standards guaranteed in the same way as they are today, at our external borders.

As President Juncker has said, we have no ideological attachment to the backstop in its current form. We are open to alternative arrangements as long as all the objectives of the backstop are fulfilled.

However, until now, no alternative solutions that meet all the objectives of the backstop have been presented.

I can see challenges down the line: the UK government seems to want a regulatory and customs land border in place while also putting some regulatory checks around the island of Ireland.

Let's see if work over the coming weeks confirms if that is the case.

I also note that general principles would need to be transformed into legally operative solutions.

But in any event, I am determined to continue the work with our British colleagues.

The real question today is: **does the UK have an equally effective and operational alternative to our backstop?**

If so, we will examine it and see if it is compatible with the Withdrawal Agreement.

I see no particular reason for optimism today, but **work will continue** at technical level and at political level.

Ladies and gentlemen,

2/ The other key subject at this stage concerns the strategic partnership, which we must build, or rebuild, with the United Kingdom after Brexit.

The Political Declaration that we agreed with the UK last November opens the possibility for a **wide-ranging partnership**, in economic affairs, sectoral cooperation, police and judicial cooperation, and cooperation in defence and foreign affairs.

In economic affairs, **our starting point is a free trade agreement but our Political Declaration leaves the door open to a more ambitious partnership**, if there is common will to do so. We are willing to be as ambitious as possible.

However, **such an ambitious economic relationship will have to be accompanied by guarantees for a level playing field.**

Behind the technical expression “level playing field”, there are human, social and regional realities. The UK and the EU will remain neighbours and our companies will continue to compete with each other.

In other words, **the level of ambition of our future free trade agreement will clearly depend on the social, environment, competition and state aid guarantees** that we can agree together.

I spoke to many members of Parliament yesterday. Future agreements will require ratification by unanimity, including ratification by some regional parliaments. Never underestimate the difficulty of ratification. We need clear commitments that there will be no fiscal, social, or environmental dumping against us.

[THREE PURPOSES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Apologies if I gave you too many technical details about Brexit.

But such details are necessary to understand where we are in this negotiation on a legally precise text.

The two issues I mentioned – Ireland and the level playing field – are in fact a **reminder of the meaning and the purpose of our European Union.**

[1 – *Solidarity*]

Behind the backstop for Ireland, there is a strong sense of solidarity amongst the EU27, which is central to our Union.

Among all 27 Member States, **Ireland will be the country most impacted by Brexit.**

Therefore, it is only natural that the solidarity of the other Member States is very strong.

Ultimately, **if EU Member States do not stand united and in solidarity with a Member State when its essential national interests are at stake, then what would be the meaning of the European Union?** It would have lost its purpose.

The solidarity with Ireland also demonstrates an important point: **in our Union, you do not have to be a big Member State to be important to all.**

This is why the situation in Ireland is so important, not only in Dublin and Derry/Londonderry, but also in Tallinn and Warsaw, Rome and Nicosia.

As somebody mentioned to me – Liverpool fans will forgive us – this solidarity expresses the idea that **'you'll never walk alone'**.

Ladies and gentlemen,

[2 – *The European model of society*]

Behind the issue of the level playing field, there is the European model of society.

We have built our Union on fundamental principles and values, but also on the sense that, with all our differences, we Europeans share a specific societal model.

A model that distinguishes us from most of the rest of the world.

A model that we have developed together through the years, with social protection, high environmental and labour standards, fair taxation, rules on state aid, *unsere Soziale Marktwirtschaft*.

We will not weaken this model because the UK has decided to leave the European Union.

On the contrary, **we hope that the UK, while leaving the EU, is not leaving Europe.**

We hope that the UK will remain close to the principles, standards and values that we have developed together over the last 45 years.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In a way, **Brexit is also a wake-up call for the Union.**

Europe needs to be ready to change what needs to be changed.

And **change is indeed at the heart of the ambitious agenda set by President-elect Ursula von der Leyen**, whether it is about presenting a European Green Deal, building an economy that works for all, tackling the challenges and seizing the opportunities of artificial intelligence or building a genuine European Defence Union.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I mentioned a series of **challenges** in the beginning of this speech.

I might have sounded a bit dramatic, but I also want to pass a **message of hope.**

If we are **ready to embrace change but at the same time remain constant in our defence of democracy, solidarity and our European model of society**, there is no challenge that the EU cannot address.

Personally, I hope that we will address the challenges ahead of us together with the UK, which is our close neighbour and will **always remain our partner, ally and friend**.

Thank you for your attention.