

► **Donald Tusk**, *President of the European Council*. – Mr President, the last European Council sitting was as difficult as any of my term. And even though we found a common solution, the real test of time is ahead of us, because of the referendum in the United Kingdom on whether or not to remain a member of the European Union. Only the British people can and will decide that. All we could do on our side was to agree a new settlement for Britain within the EU. And we did.

The 28 Heads of State or Government unanimously agreed and adopted a legally-binding and irreversible settlement for the United Kingdom in the EU. The decision concerning a new settlement is in conformity with the Treaties and cannot be annulled by the European Court of Justice. It will, however, only enter into force if the British people vote to stay. If they vote to leave, the settlement will cease to exist.

We have agreed to do all this in a way that does not compromise the European Union's fundamental values, such as the freedom of movement and the principle of non-discrimination, and without compromising the future development of the Economic and Monetary Union. If I had any doubts about this, I would never have proposed such a settlement.

Despite many difficulties, the leaders did not walk away from the negotiating table, because we were fully aware of the stakes involved, namely keeping the UK in the EU and the future geopolitics of Europe. Here I would like to express sincere thanks to President Juncker and his whole team, with whom we worked side-by-side during the process. Let me also thank Parliament's negotiators, who were engaged in the negotiations, and who were highly effective in obtaining their goals. It is my firm belief that we needed to involve the European Parliament fully in this process. I will always remember the crucial talks with President Schulz, with Group leader Verhofstadt, and with my distinguished colleagues Gualtieri and Brok. It is thanks to you that this agreement allowed us to take into consideration the interests of the Union as a whole. Without your help, this agreement would not have been possible. Thank you very much again.

The European Union will respect the decision of the British people. If the majority votes to leave, that is what will happen. It will change Europe forever, and it will be a change for the worse. Of course, that is my personal opinion. Prime Minister Cameron said in the House of Commons on Monday that now is not the time to split the West. I could not agree more.

(Applause)

This is why I did my best to prevent that.

On the other hand, if Britain decides to stay, I hope this Parliament will also ensure that the agreed settlement is transformed into the necessary legislation and will enter into force.

Let me now turn to the migration crisis. Leaders agreed that our joint action plan with Turkey remains a priority, and we must do our utmost for it to succeed. This ultimately means that the high numbers we are still witnessing have to go down, and quickly. This is also why we decided to organise a special meeting with Turkey on 7 March 2016.

The discussion among leaders focused on building consensus in the crisis. To do that, we must first avoid having a battle between plans A, B and C. It does not make any sense, as it only creates divisions within Europe without bringing us any closer to a solution. Instead, we must look for a synthesis of different approaches. There is no good alternative to a comprehensive European plan.

Secondly, a European response is not only about the decisions taken in Brussels. It is also – and even more so – about the decisions taken in the capitals. We must accept that, but at the same time we should seek to improve the coordination of those decisions. The European Union is here for all of us to cooperate. And lastly, we must respect the rules and laws that we have all adopted together. This concerns both the decisions on relocation and the need to gradually go back to a situation where all Members of the Schengen area fully apply the Schengen Borders Code. There is no doubt that we need to restore Schengen. It will cost money, take time and require a huge political effort. There will be countries that may not be able to cope with this challenge, but Europe will be there to assist them. We need to invest in Schengen, not in its collapse.

(Applause)

Its future will be one of the key issues to be discussed by the leaders on 7 March.

Separately, leaders confirmed the need to keep humanitarian aid flowing to Syria and the Syrian refugees in the region. We welcomed the donors' conference in London, where two thirds of the pledges came from Europe. Leaders agreed to move quickly to disburse the EUR 3.3 billion pledged for 2016 as well as the EUR 3 billion agreed to help the refugees in Turkey. This is not only a European responsibility, therefore I will continue to build a global response to this crisis at the G7 and G20 meetings later this year.

Finally, I want to end with a plea not to allow the stormy days to derail our efforts. We cannot simply wait and see. We have entered the most dangerous time in European history. We must act with resolve. I count on your support.

(Applause)