**Melania Gabriela Ciot,** *President-in-Office of the Council***.** – Mr President, barely three weeks ago I was addressing you on the same topic, still hoping that some form of resolution would emerge from the parliamentary process in London. Unfortunately, as you know, the British parliament and government are still grappling with the issue of whether and how to exit the Union as we speak.

The European Council has expressed, among others, the willingness to adapt the political declaration, including in some of the directions consider during the indicative votes at the Commons.

The uncertainties and negative consequences therefore still remain as regards citizens, businesses and public authorities, with an already clear economic impact in terms of level of activity, investment and therefore jobs on both sides of the Channel.

At this very late stage, we are still determined to facilitate the conclusion of the withdrawal agreement. This should however not be to detriment of the solidarity among the Member States as regards, in particular, Ireland.

We therefore need to continue to take all possible steps in order to facilitate an orderly withdrawal. This is why in March the European Council considered a UK request for a short extension on the Article 50 period and decided on a two-track approach. Either the withdrawal agreement could not to be approved by 29 March and the extension would run until 12 April, and the UK would have to indicate a way forward, or until 22 May if the withdrawal agreement is approved.

As you know, the withdrawal agreement has not been approved in time so the operating withdrawal date is now 12 April. The UK will have to indicate a way forward, possibly leading to a further extension, which would again required a unanimity decision by the European Council. Should the UK indeed come back with a request for a significant expansion, it should not undermine the operations of the institutions and would therefore have to foresee the holding of the European elections.

On the EU side at the least, I am confident that our institutions will be able to complete the consent and conclusion process in a good time and therefore ensure a timely entry into force of the agreement, if the agreement is eventually approved in the House of Commons.

The withdrawal agreement continues to be the best solution for both sides, including in terms of protection of citizens’ rights. We are, however, under no illusion that should a no deal be the outcome of the process in London, it will have serious consequences, and we might know it at the last minute.

It is therefore all the more necessary to continue our preparation for all outcomes, including a no deal scenario. I’m so far encouraged by the significant progress made at the Union and national level, on preparedness and contingency. At this late stage in their legislative term, we should be pleased with a large number of contingency and preparedness related measures that our institutions have been able to agree, in spite of the heavy workload.

I am confident that with your cooperation it will be possible to complete the adoption of the remaining contingency measures in good time.