

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 21ST NOVEMBER, 2021 – MAROS SEFCOVIC

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 21ST NOVEMBER, 2021

MAROS SEFCOVIC,

EU COMMISSION VICE PRESIDENT

((Please check against delivery (uncorrected copies))

AM: Lots of Brexit sabre rattling between the UK and the EU over the Northern Ireland Protocol. That's the bit of the Brexit deal that allows trade to keep flowing freely between Northern Ireland and the EU. The UK has been threatening to trigger Article 16 which allows one side to press pause on parts of the deal. But this week relations seem to have improved with both the UK and the Irish saying, hold on, maybe there is a deal to be done. Maros Sefcovic is the EU Commission Vice President dealing with Brexit.

Can I start by asking you whether you think – you've been to Northern Ireland yourself, you've looked at what's going on on the ground. The UK government clearly thinks that this Protocol is not working properly for the people of Northern Ireland. Does the EU now agree with that assessment?

A: First and foremost thank you much Andrew, for your yet another kind invitation to your show and also for putting this topic so prominently on the agenda because I'm sure that it's very interesting for your viewers in the UK and in particular in Northern Ireland. As you rightly pointed out I visited Northern Ireland in September and I'm in frequent – I was in permanent contact with the stakeholders from businesses, political leaders, civic society and it's very clear what they're telling us. Focus on the key priorities, on the problems we have to solve and I hear all the time four groups of problems. Supply of medicines, need to reduce the customs formalities, reduce SPS checks and find a way how we can involve better Northern Irish stakeholders in the dealings of the Protocol. And if we solve these problems I think we are opening the ways for the smooth operation for the Protocol for new investments which been just announced in the course of the last week and my feeling is that the Northern Irish people want us

to work together to look for the solutions so the Protocol would work properly and in smooth as possible way.

AM: David Frost, the UK, Lord Frost, the UK negotiator on all of this has given this morning a fairly straightforward sounding answer to what he thinks the solution would be. He says: "Good which both we and the EU agree aren't going to leave Northern Ireland, should not be treated as if they were moving from one country to another because they are not. Goods going into Ireland should be checked in the Irish Sea to protect the EU single market and to avoid a hard border." Is there anything about that with which you disagree?

A: I think that what was very important in the Lord Frost's article was the word 'of urgency.' And sometimes I have the feeling that of our meetings that I'm the only who push for urgent solutions, because we've been putting on the table the proposals on solving uninterrupted supply of medicines to Northern Ireland since 30th of June. And I remember very well that Lord Frost been telling me that what is very important for him is not only content but also process. And therefore I was waiting if we can deliver on that solution jointly. And I have to say Andrew today this is not the case. We had some progress on Friday. If we would still be in this mode of political posturing and bringing new and new problems to the table I don't think that it will solve the most pressing issue for the people of Northern Ireland and therefore we might be acting alone to make sure that the Northern Ireland people will have the medicines they need. And I think this would apply to all other issues, because whenever there is the problem presented we always find a solution. And the question is are we in the mood of finding solutions or permanently looking for the problems?

AM: That is exactly the question.

A: And I think it clearly demonstrated that if there is a genuine problem we can find the solutions but we have to do it both of us, two of us, we are ready to do so and I hope the UK will also now

make the big move towards us, because we really made far reaching proposals and put them on the table.

AM: It's just that that proposal from Lord Frost seems to a lot of people relatively straightforward. Goods which aren't going to leave Northern Ireland treated one way, goods which might go to Dublin or to the South treated in a different way and I just wonder what there is in that that you could possibly object to and whether you still think that he is not negotiating sincerely? At the beginning of the month you suggested the British side were not being sincere in their negotiations. Have you changed your mind about that?

A: I think you know Andrew, I would ask your viewers that question. Would UK accept not to have the overview of what's coming to the UK market? Would they accept it? I don't think so. And you just simply have to understand that if something is coming to the EU single market that we have to have an overview. And I am fully aware that what the complaints in Northern Ireland have been and therefore what we proposed was super reduce the customs formality. We are ready to reduce them by half. We reduced 80% cut in SPS checks and many other forthcoming gestures and solutions from our side. But we cannot do, we cannot undo the Brexit, especially the type as the UK has proposed it, negotiated it and signed the Agreement upon it with us. And therefore I think that these are the framework within which we have to find pragmatic solutions and we are in the solutions even more since the 1st of January of this year when we had the discussion about the implementation of the Protocol. And I'm sure that if Lord Frost and UK would double their efforts and come to meet in the half way we can resolve all the outstanding issues to the satisfaction of the people of Northern Ireland.

AM: I mentioned sabre rattling earlier on. Now a couple of weeks ago a lot of people thought Britain was on the edge of triggering Article 16. Do you think that's still going to happen?

A: We had a change of tone in the discussions over the last two weeks which I really appreciate. Also our discussion of these practical issues like for example medicines was more constructive than before. So it's the decision of the UK government. We are doing everything possible to avoid it because of course it will have serious consequences, first and foremost for the people in Northern Ireland but also for the EU/UK relations and therefore I want to stay on these positive terms. I want to look for the solutions and I hope that we will have a positive engagement from our UK partners in this effort as well.

AM: Before we stay on the sunlit uplands now however, you talk about serious consequences. Simon Coveney, the Irish Foreign Minister suggested that if Britain did that, in other words paused the entire Agreement over the border then the response from the EU might be to pull the plug on the complete trading agreement between the UK and the EU after Brexit. In other words return us to World Trade Rules. Is that a plausible possibility or is that just more sabre rattling?

A: I would say that we shouldn't go into the hypothetical negative scenarios because I am positively driven and I want to solve the solution. What I would just say is the fact that when we've been discussing the withdrawal of the UK from the EU there was very clear sequence which we all agreed on. That first we have to build basis for our future relations and the basis was orderly Withdrawal Agreement, then of course the best possible solution for the island of Ireland which was on the Protocol and on this basis we then built the future relationship which is of course presented in the form of a Trade and Cooperation Agreement. So if you pull the plug from the basis, then of course you have a lot of problems and therefore I think we should avoid them and we should focus on positive action and on solving the problems for the people of Northern Ireland.

AM: Let me move onto something else entirely. We've seen all the protests in Austria and parts of German speaking Europe about the new mandatory vaccination and the partial lockdowns. Do you think that's going to spread across central Europe? Do you see problems ahead on Covid as Europe struggles with this new wave?

A: Clearly we go through very difficult period, I wouldn't hide it. I see you know how the rate of infection is spiralling up and across the EU we are looking for the best possible solution and of course respecting that if it comes to have the competencies are mostly on the national government level. So what we do, we coordinate, we are offering our helping hand from the Commission, especially to those countries where is the high vaccination hesitancy. What we can do to explain better the benefits of vaccination. How can we assure the best practices where very often it's better that the vaccination teams go after the patients than to push people to queue in the long queues to get vaccinated and to provide as much information as possible to motivate the people to get vaccinated, because we see that of course the high vaccination rate, the less exposure of the mortal danger to the high rate of hospitalisation and I'm afraid that we are ahead of us very, very difficult months in this regard.

AM: There's a real puzzle here as to why so few people are getting vaccinated in parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Why do you think the vaccine hesitancy is so high?

A: I think that first and foremost there was a huge discussion at the beginning of this year about when the vaccines will arrive to European member states and once we have the adequate supplies of the vaccines we had a bit of an easing up of the infections. The summer was here, it was I would say full of hope and the people saw that this virus would gradually go away. Unfortunately this is not the case. Again we have autumn, we have winter coming and the infection rate is spiking up again and therefore now I think we really need all hands on the deck, increase as quickly as possible

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 21ST NOVEMBER, 2021 – MAROS SEFCOVIC

vaccination rate and to offer all the help, financial, professional to the first line responders who are the doctors, nurses, medical professionals in our hospitals because they are under a lot of, lot of stress I would say everywhere in the European Union.

AM: Mr Sefcovic, a hard winter ahead. Thanks very much indeed for coming on and joining us this morning. Thank you.

Ends