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AFCO committee meeting on "Conclusion of the Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community"

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Let me start with referring to what those of you who were members of the Constitutional Affairs Committee back in 2015 might remember. Our first discussion on potential Brexit took place at the beginning of September 2015, with the participation of two experts Jean Claude Piris and Charles Grant. That was six months before EU first agreement with the British Prime Minister, David Cameron negotiated at the European Council in February 2016 and ten months before the British referendum about leaving the Union. And here we are, nearly five years later and what was a possibility is now a fact of life.

When we were beginning this meeting the ascent of Her Majesty to the Withdrawal Bill was still awaited. I have just got the message that the Bill has become a law.

This is for all of us here an extremely emotional moment. To repeat our famous line - that "we regret but we respect" and my private line that "I hope that one day somebody will call from London and call it all off"- at the moment when the EP is beginning, with this vote here, finalization of its own procedure to give consent - makes sense to me. It underlines our attitude to this process.

I am sure our House will continue to be constructive in its approach and will give consent to the Council decision on concluding the Withdrawal Agreement with the UK through our vote today and on the 29 of January in the plenary.

I understand that tomorrow the Withdrawal Agreement will be signed by Presidents of the European Council, Charles Michel and of the European Commission, Ursula

von der Leyen. Then, the Agreement will be taken to London for the signature of the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. So yes, as many of us here, I do regret that our British colleagues and friends will be leaving the EU at the end of the month.

I also do hope that EU citizens in the UK and British nationals here on the continent will not pay the price of Brexit.

I would also like to use this opportunity to thank all colleagues from the European Parliament administration who have worked very hard to make this political process go as smooth as possible, supporting and facilitating our efforts as MEPs.

But our work will not be over with the vote today in this Committee. The Parliament's task will be to continue dealing with three strands of work over the coming months.

The first strand is the negotiations on the future relationship with the UK in line with the Political Declaration - there are tough talks ahead, as we need to complete the negotiations within the timeframe of 8 months. Our priority option has always been an association agreement between the UK and EU, with article 217 as the legal base. This is still my hope.

The second strand is the actual implementation of the withdrawal agreement and ensuring that the UK and the EU faithfully implement its provisions. Our House will especially keep an eye on making sure that our citizens in the UK, and UK nationals in the EU, will not have their rights taken away from them. I believe that the Constitutional Affairs Committee should be responsible for coordinating the European Parliament's oversight of the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement, in particular of the Irish protocol but also of all aspects of governance.

The third strand will deal with potential contingency measures - something I hope will not be necessary. Due to the position of HM Government on not wanting to extend the transition period, the possibility of a no-deal on the 1 of January 2021 remains a possibility and we need to be prepared for such an eventuality. We will know more whether there will be a risk of a cliff edge by 1 July this year, in line with what is envisaged in the Withdrawal Agreement. But it is my sincere hope that we can find an agreement on the best possible future relationship.