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SOPHIA IN’T VELD

AM: Can I ask you first of all, for all those people who think that Brexit is now in question what is the view from Brussels? We’ve trigged Article 50, the clock is ticking, Brexit is going to happen, isn’t it?
SI: It is. Mrs May has triggered the procedure, it has started, we have a period two years with a possible extension of one year, but that would be complicated because that would require the unanimous consent of all 27 other member states. So you know, the EU has been ready to negotiate for some time now. We are waiting for the UK and we hope that we can start on time and follow the timetable that has been set.

AM: And again, all this loose talk about a hard Brexit or a soft Brexit, from the EU’s point of view you want to do a deal which ensures that Britain is in a worse position than now and therefore you want a hard Brexit?
SI: No, we don’t want the UK to be in a worse position. We regret Brexit. I mean, I personally would have preferred the UK to remain on board, but the British people have voted so now we have to deal with it, and I think we agree with Mrs May on one thing - Brexit is Brexit. You cannot have your cake and eat it. You’re a member of the EU or you’re not. At the same time we will still have to work together, we will still be neighbours, we all have shared interests. So we do feel that whatever, a hard Brexit, a soft Brexit, that we need to negotiate, as I say, as friends and good neighbours. We’re not enemies, we are not antagonists, we all have an interest in a good outcome of the negotiations.

AM: Now clearly the British side is some disarray because of the election campaign at the moment. Is there any way of buying more time for these talks?
SI: Well, I think the treaties are very clear, there is a period of two years, starting on the day that Article 50 is triggered, that was the 29th March, so it will be the 29th March 2019. And as I said, there is a provision that there can be a one year extension but that requires unanimity, so that will be very difficult. But I mean, I think it’s a bit early to start talking about extensions, I think it’s time we all sit down and start the work, and I would really hope that – I mean, clearly the elections didn’t produce the outcome that Mrs May expected. You know, we just have to wait and see what kind of government will be formed. Whatever the government will be. I think, as an outsider, of course, I cannot tell the British what to do, but we really, really hope for a government that can command a broad and stable majority. The kind of government that has national unity in order to negotiate a deal that’s best for the UK and for the EU.

AM: So in simple terms what would happen if the British parliament decided it didn’t want to go ahead with Brexit?
SI: Well, nobody knows really. That’s uncharted territory, it’s not really foreseen, but if the Brits were to reconsider, which I don’t think that will happen, but were they to reconsider I suppose we could talk. But still membership of the EU, there’s certain rules that you have to comply with, and that goes for any member of the European Union, and that still stands.

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