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## THINK THE EU27'S BREXIT UNITY WON'T HOLD? IT WILL, SAYS BULGARIA

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Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva said the EU's four-year-old penalties against Russia over its encroachment in Ukraine show that the U.K.'s 27 partners in the bloc can maintain a common front during the second phase of talks on the British plan to leave.

Both cases require EU governments to put longer-term political interests above shorter-term economic ones, she said. The sanctions against Russia -- prolonged for another six months in December -- include curbs on its financial, energy and defense industries and provoked a retaliatory Russian ban on EU farm goods.

It's really, really important to stay united as the Brexit process advances, Zaharieva, whose country is the poorest in the EU and took over its rotating six-month presidency on Jan. 1, told reporters on Thursday in Sofia. I think we can. The Russia sanctions are absolutely a good example.

Britain and the rest of the EU are gearing up for the start of negotiations on their post-Brexit ties after a European summit in December declared that sufficient progress had been made over the divorce terms, including the financial settlement. Leaders including German Chancellor Angela Merkel say the next phase will be tougher -- a view echoed by Zaharieva.

The first phase is not such a big problem to stay united, she said. Phase two will be really difficult.

Zaharieva said a transitional period between the U.K.'s scheduled departure from the EU in March 2019 and the entry into force of any agreement on Britain's future relationship with the bloc should last until the end of 2020. That's because the EU's current multiannual budget, to which Britain is a net contributor, runs through 2020, she said.

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