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## **MAY PROMOTES BREXIT ON 'FIRST-ANNIVERSARY' UK TOUR**

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EU Observer (28 March 2018)

May visited a cashmere factory in Scotland, a school in the north-east of England, a farm in Northern Ireland and was to due to end her tour in a Welsh valley and then west London later in the day.

"I am determined that the Brexit we pursue is one that strengthens the bonds that unite us - because I believe ours is the world's most successful union," she said in the Scottish town of Ayr.

May's UK tour marks the first anniversary of her official 'Article 50' letter to the EU to launch the two-year Brexit process, which will end one year from now, on 29 March 2019.

The prime minister secured last week the EU's agreement to start talks on a future relationship, but uncertainties remain over the first negotiations to be completed, over the divorce itself.

Since it triggered Article 50 of the EU treaty - the exit procedure - the UK government has accepted EU demands for a financial settlement and for an overview of the European Court of Justice for the rights of EU citizens in the UK. . It has also accepted a transition period that will be more restrictive than it wanted, and the continued access of EU fishermen in UK waters.

According to a poll published on Wednesday, 44 percent of Britons think that "the government's handling of the Brexit negotiations so far has been 'a total shambles'," with 18 percent who it has been "satisfactory" and three percent "excellent."

Among those who voted Leave, 35 percent share this opinion - 56 percent among Remain voters.

"I am determined that our future will be a bright one," May said ahead of Thursday's tour.

She argued that "it's a future in which we trade freely with friends and partners across Europe and beyond," and the UK would thrive.

At this midpoint in the Brexit process, May - weakened by a failed snap election in June last year and who has been undermined by hardline Brexiteers within her own cabinet - can however count on only an ambivalent public opinion.

According to Wednesday's poll, by ComRes for the Daily Express, only 29 percent are "optimistic" that their household "will be better off" after Brexit, and 35 percent are optimistic that the UK will be able to negotiate a trade deal with the EU before leaving.

Some 65 percent think however that "the UK economy will be back to business as usual within a

couple of years".

Despite misgivings about the government's performance and doubts about the result of the negotiations with the EU, 68 percent of the respondents say that "those who voted against Brexit should respect the will of the majority" - with only 35 percent thinking there should be a second referendum.

"There is some sign of movement, but not enough to suggest that the country is anything other than more or less evenly divided down the middle on the subject, much as it was on referendum day itself," political scientist John Curtice wrote in a recent study published by The UK in a Changing Europe, a London-Based think tank.

He noted that there was "far from sufficient evidence to be sure that a second ballot would see a reversal of the original result."

For May, the most difficult issue, and the main obstacle to a divorce agreement with the EU, is the Irish border issue.

During her visit to Bangor, Northern Ireland, on Thursday, she repeated her "commitment to avoid a hard border" between the UK region and the Republic of Ireland, and to "protect" the 1998 peace agreement.

While she accepted last week the principle of keeping a "regulatory alignment" between both parts of the island, she also repeated on Wednesday her "absolute responsibility to protect the integrity of the United Kingdom as a whole."

She insisted that there should be "no new barriers within our common domestic market and that "no prime minister could leave these things to chance, because they are absolutely crucial to our success as a country in the future."

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