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“Current situation in the European Union”

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Distinguished participants of the Tatra Summit,
Dear Friends,

Once upon a time, and I think it was somehow toward the end of the eighteenth century, an English poet and painter lived. His name was William Blake.

He said that "great things are done when men and mountains meet". I am sure that if he lived today he would add women to this encounter.

It would not make much sense to expect that he had Tatra mountains and Tatra Summit on his mind. So mountains are not the only reason I bring his prophetic statement to our dinner event. William Blake was not recognized during his lifetime. Only later steps of the history allowed people to see Blake's work as prophetic.

With this prophetic capacity of history in mind I would like to dedicate two minutes of my remarks to the history of Europe. And for all of you who will endure my presence here on this podium till the end of my speech I can promise some notes of optimism in the final part of the remarks.

For the most part of its long history, Europe was a landscape marred by nationalistic impulses that tended to metastasize into open jingoism, what, in turn, more often than not, led to bloody, prolonged wars. Nationalism gives birth to fear and fear gives birth to wars. Francois Mitterrand said that but many before and after him as well.

That experience of unstable Europe, threatened in its existence, divided by political and military ambitions, locked in wars for hegemony, and periodically raising from the rubble of destruction, was an experience of many generations before ours.

Nationalism has never worked for Europe. We normally make references to the tragedy of the Second World War. But if we look at the First World War, we realize that it came about somehow from within the European family. There was no Adolf Hitler then. All the national leaders were more or less normal people. But they all were being eaten from inside by the worm of nationalism.

If you look at the history of crises, indeed, a long one, you can see that they often have roots in establishmentarian or elite kind of folly. We have seen that in recent years not only in Europe, which is not a consolation. And today the political propensity to move from the normal, or the sane, to the crazy and insane has skyrocketed.

We probably agree that the European Community took off as one of the most fantastic projects in human history, because it spoke to the soul and the heart of the Europeans and their war experience. It has got into our guts and stayed for many decades. It was not a purely brainy exercise.

If we stay with the history for one more while, we can see that behind the narrative of the EU in the beginning there was this pledge, this deep commitment to do everything to replace those nationalistic impulses with feelings of European universalism. The common supervision of coal and steel production made enemies into friends. It was pragmatic, but also, in a sense, romantic.

It dramatically re-wired our understanding of nationality, community, cooperation, solidarity and it made a large-scale conflict and war virtually unthinkable in Europe.

But then we somehow missed the moment, when this legitimization narrative, based on a common European good, on forging lasting friendship and solidarity out of the wars' ashes, became more or less irrelevant to younger generations of European citizens and, unfortunately, also to new generations of European leaders. That weakening of legitimacy allowed the return of virulent nationalisms out of the margins into the mainstream of the European discourse.

Today the European Union is losing its political cohesion. With UK leaving the Union, the group of member states not sharing the common currency will become weaker as a partner in shaping Europe. They have already moved in distancing themselves further on. Their economic weight is smaller. They suffer from Euroskepticism of their political elites. This concern has brought us here. The political gravity of the Union will move further to the eurogroup. The idea of core Europe will continue to pop up. There are subsets of countries that want to assert their ambitions outside of the mainstream, if not contrary to it.

There is also this idea of "leading from the center", based on flexible coalitions, rather than on a more or less permanent group of "core" member states. The leader's role would be to mobilize a so-called "constructive consensus" around specific issues. What a challenge for Europe!

This is indeed a moment when what is needed is an enlightened renaissance of people's commitment to Europe, its common values and principles. We need a citizenry seeing the EU as a part and parcel of their own life. But the chances for this kind of a positive reappropriation are rather slim. What we see, instead, is a negative reappropriation by way of populist emotions

unleashed all over Europe. This process has the most potency to change the Union, for worse, destroying cohesion at people to people level.

The perverse strength of the populist discourse comes from the fact that it refers to often legitimate grievances. At the same time it does not propose anything constructive. That makes it easier for them. It is – if I could use Dante’s description of the hell - “*like a sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls*”, a sand which dies out when the wind subsides. Reappropriation of the European project by populists would mean the end of the EU as we know it and as we once wanted to have it. Let’s be clear about it.

Because of its tendency to morph out in response to its environment, populism is an elusive target for rational response. Thus far, neither at the EU nor at the national level, we have come up with a convincing counter narrative that would buck that trend. It is not enough to make the EU more “user-friendly” to combat the so-called “deficit of democracy”.

Actually, this is no longer the problem of the “democratic deficit”. This is something much more serious that can threaten the survival of our European values, not only the institutions. And when our values are lost, we are lost. “User-friendliness” is not an equivalent in weight to the forces of populism that gain in strength exponentially. Some of us, not remembering how difficult it was to build this seemingly sturdy construction of the EU, still think that even if we poke the EU in the eye, nothing will change. That is why we so easily give in to the populist temptation.

Going back again to the “Divine Comedy” and Inferno. John F. Kennedy comes to my mind who referencing Dante said a memorable thing once: “*The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in time of moral crisis preserve their neutrality.*”

I would add that an equally good, hot place is reserved for those that stoke human fears and actively undermine the project that for many decades has been beneficial to a continent of 500 million people. We did not come up with anything better thus far and we have to defend it together. We have to work out very fast the anti-bodies for this poison running in veins of Europe. We have to invest consciously in a new, inclusive, strong in values, political culture that would be able to repulse the politics that finds its base in the worst instincts of human beings: hate for the Other.

Well, sometimes not the obvious evil is the most destructive, but the hidden evil of good people who give in to bad impulses. And let us not forget that the stability of the EU construction depends not only on formal laws, current and future treaties, regulation, institutions, intergovernmental relations, but most intimately, on the commitment of people to the values that inspired the founding generations and which are not at all shared by the rest of the world.

Next year, some member states will enter the electoral contests which may mobilize the dissatisfied sentiment for dangerous choices. We can also see new calls for referenda on the EU related matters, which could become

festivals of populisms, lies, false promises and irresponsible accusations and where uninformed people will be asked to make difficult choices on behalf of more than five hundred millions European citizens of today and of future generations.

We continue to trust that European democratic norms and institutions are too strong for politicians to destabilize them. But the risk is there. Public faith, public trust in national and European democratic institutions can be eroded by skilful populists.

This erosion has been facilitated by political acts we could see recently when fundamental democratic values and principles were turned into points of political dispute.

Far too often we can see political leaders challenging the legitimacy of Europe. This erodes the popular faith in what Europe represents, what Europe stands for.

So yes, efforts are needed to make Europe a working democracy.

One could assume that the sheer depth and length of the crises, as well as the fact that territory occupied by populists has expanded beyond what Europe could digest, are a sufficiently strong source of legitimation for deep and far reaching reforms.

However, some politicians do not see the multiple damaging crises as providing exceptionally powerful legitimacy for far reaching reforms, for governments to act favoring European solutions. They would rather take Europe back to a stage of a loose integration of states united by a not so common single market.

I am convinced that for this challenging period of enlightened renaissance of Europe, we should aim at a better balance for the traditional European dilemma on how much vision and how much pragmatism should be there in our thinking and acting, and getting people involved. It is difficult to mobilise people for a grand change without a clear direction. Contrary to views expressed by most influential politicians, I believe a vision is key now. Without a vision it is practically impossible to get people on board, to make them enthusiastic about change. As a citizen, I want to know where we want to go and why.

There are many areas of European integration where changes should continue and we have to find solutions quickly. For this to happen, we need a long term commitment from national leaders. Europe fit for both today and the future can be built only if politicians remain committed to Europe. Do we have this commitment? I have doubts to say the least.

There are democratically elected leaders who do not base their European narrative on facts and positive emotions. Politicians can build their political

capital on a logic where facts do not matter. We must take the politics back to truth and positive emotions.

We, who care about Europe, should help citizens of Europe, pressured by irresponsible elites to hide into the shells of nationalism and identitarianism, to resist, and once again proudly display the European Union flag as a symbol of freedom and of humanity. We are a community of free people.

Subsidiarity has come back as a buzzword. But it is presented as a tool to defend people and states against Europe. It looks like a fight of national parliaments against the expansion of Europe. It is a false approach to subsidiarity.

Modern European subsidiarity is about distributing responsibilities, about agreeing on what each level of decision making in Europe should do to best deliver what citizens expect and need, about doing things together in a well orchestrated manner, acting toward a common goal. It is actually about cooperation and solidarity.

But the lesson so far is that in the EU nothing will change unless there is a political will to move forward. This time, however, the challenge is more sophisticated. It is also moral and it is also intellectual. To make the long story short, Europe has a problem with national leadership's commitment to Europe. We see declining capacity of thinking and acting in a pro-European way, of delivering on European commitments. We see national agendas being brought to Brussels or Bratislava. We see opposition to European solutions and then, politicians on their way home criticizing Europe for inaction. This is not an honest and sincere intermediation between Europe and citizens. It does not build bridges, it rather provides a negative disruption.

Yes, we need action but we need also a genuine debate about what Europe is for, today and tomorrow. This debate must involve citizens. People want to talk. People want to discuss different policy choices, different integration paths. People want to have this debate with other people. These other people might have different views and dreams. These diverging views are one more reason for having a talking Europe.

We all should leave the ivory tower and get involved more in a dialogue with citizens. Dialogue means listening to the other side. We should also create networks, frameworks in which to mobilize academics, think tanks, civil society.

One of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's novels is called "Elective Affinities". Nobody can be forced to become a European against her or his wish. In this sense Europe is an "elective affinity" – you have to choose it not only with your passport but also with your heart. Only then we can achieve launching of a bottom up Europe, inclusive and participatory.

Of course nothing is perfect in Europe and those who complain about Europe are right. But this is exactly why we have to work together to refresh European democracy and European sovereignty. And this cannot be done with populists

and nationalists - it must be done against them. Tatra summit takes place in this part of Europe where people rejected, through a huge social, economic, institutional effort, the reality without democracy and without freedom and decided through referenda to become part of common political Europe. We had in our history moments when we were against those who were against Europe. And we won.

Focusing on national interests has undermined Europe's efficacy in coping with the biggest challenges. We all know them by heart. These problems are here to stay. This is true for migration but also for globalization and trade. Russia is also here to stay, and it will continue to be just around the corner. UK and EU will stay for a while on uncharted waters with all uncertainties and risks for all of us. And euro-zone will remain an unfinished business until political will to complete it returns.

In this context, some analysts have undusted the old notion of muddling through. It never meant a standstill but it always led to the lowest common denominator in decision making, short termism in times of structural challenges, vision-less step by step moving forward, responsiveness to immediate pressures, ignoring root causes, inability to reach sensible compromises, unfinished business in the most fragile elements of our architecture and policy tools. Summits, heads' meetings come and go and we continue to see lack of political unity, we do not see that foundation is being created for long term success, we rather see risks of long term damage to what we have built so far.

So yes, there are reasons to worry. Nobody will be able to convince the public tomorrow that it was not clear what was at stake today. Future generations will have the right not to forgive the leaders in power today the lost opportunities, the high opportunity costs, the regress in Europe, the damage to key values and principles that used to keep us together.

But is it indeed Europe that is falling or it is rather national egoism that is blocking needed solutions, leaving less and less room in the public space for pro-European forces?

I see growing risk of an inward looking small continent, torn, lacerated by nationalisms, protectionism, jingoism, xenophobia, intolerance, identitarianism, authoritarianism, opposing globalization and trade, turning on its back on migration and open society. But this would not be Europe.

Growing appetite for simplistic rhetoric and solutions to rather complex problems and people's uncertainties and fears is dangerous. Pushing people toward making choices through referenda - which for politicians is an escape from responsibility - is not fair and it is irresponsible in times when citizens withdraw from traditional political processes or even go further against the establishment. They become angry citizens. They do not want to cooperate. And they are forced to make choices. It can start a never ending, lethal for European unity, process of questioning each European decision.

Political minorities in individual states will decide about the future of all Europeans.

We must be absolutely clear that international agreements cannot become hostages to national or regional interests and multiple potential vetoes. Today any of the 28 member states can seek to protect interests of a single affected industry and this way stop any trade deal. Europe can be paralyzed by narrow interest groups which can always emerge somewhere in the European Union. There will be always some groups who will win, some will lose but society as a whole will benefit.

And we must also see that in the global reality of tomorrow each country individually is a small boat on a big ocean.

Some of you here do not know the world short of European integration. I, however, do remember my home country isolated from integrating Europe, remaining for decades on the other bank of the river. Fortunately, the door to integrating Europe stayed ajar long enough and got fully open when the transition to market economy, democracy and rule of law could begin in our part of Europe.

Now, in this complex situation that we face, Eastern and Central European countries would have to be quite clear about whether they want to become a part of the problem or a part of the solution to the EU's challenges. We have to ask ourselves: do we want to be at the center of Europe or do we accept to be relegated to the sidelines?

Eastern Europe has been recently quite commonly seen as this part of Europe where democracy is in danger. Indeed, there are populist threats there but they are also in western member states. Of course in case of Central and Eastern Europe the combination of populism and the image of society that has a rather short history of living in democracy makes this rather ugly stereotype easier to formulate.

But these are societies that have been through an unprecedented and successful process of a grand change to democracy. Our challenge as societies and European citizens is to identify our own responsibility for Europe, for upholding European values and principles. We have to understand why our young voters move to the radical right on the political spectrum, why populist, euroskeptical parties are the most popular choice for first time voters. We must see why the mainstream parties do not cope with young people problems and chances so they are sceptical about traditional politics and vote against the pro European establishment, going where they expect to see the change makers.

Some countries of this region at the moment are ambivalent in their willingness to be part of a rescuing effort. Leadership sometimes prefers to steer their nations into uncharted waters. And this ambivalence in our part of Europe is not being helpful in securing the European project for next generations.

The cooperation and collaborative spirit between all states is an absolute must. With one or two obstinate members, veering off course, in their small boatlets, despite the heavy storm, the whole rescue action of the EU project is under question. As in every rescue operation, if you do not help, you only add to general disturbance.

And let's not beat about the bush: the route must be the one of consolidation of representative and deliberative democracy, human rights, freedom of press and thought, observance of fundamental laws, respect for independent institutions, like the courts, and the civil society.

Unfortunately, sometimes key politicians in the region want to take us back to a primal stage of the integration, with a weak single market and with something that in some places, is called "illiberal democracy". If this vision is enacted - let's be straightforward about it – it means, without a doubt, that in the long run, the EU will become incapacitated as a global actor.

As champions of the community method in the past, countries of the region have been well aware of the risks involved in the weakening of the level playing field in Europe which would follow if we undermine European institutions and abandon the community method.

The voices from East Central Europe will be listened with attention and understanding once they are constructive. Instead of hiding in the shell of nationalism or regional self-sufficiency, we should express robustness in demonstrating responsibility for Europe.

One way of showing a durable commitment to the Union would be to look afresh at the question of Eurozone membership, not as something forced upon us, but as an engine of the region's future growth and stability. Austria and Slovakia, as members of the euro, could consistently consult the region's "pre-ins" on the future governance of the euro zone. Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, the only non euro 2004 enlargement left overs, should be encouraged to join all the mechanisms, which are open to nonmembers in order to retain influence.

We need a self-confident, transparent consolidated democracies in Central Eastern Europe which will bring added value that would not only benefit the region but improve prospects for the EU at large.

To conclude, let me say the following. Let us keep the Bratislava process as a road toward solving current problems on which we are dramatically divided and let the Rome event be the meeting about the future and for the future. This two track approach can provide results. It will be useful if it contributes to political unity.

If we burden Rome with the current challenges, it would be a damaging festival, a painful demonstration of divisions, fragmentations and polarization.

Let us therefore follow this parallel path strategy.

Let us make Rome the beginning of a new road map that would take us toward sustainable future.

Let us have also trust that one day on the Bratislava road map all points will be marked as delivered. And the road from Bratislava would be swiftly incorporated into the Rome road toward future.

This would confirm the wisdom of an old medieval sentiment that you can reach Rome through different paths or, in a more modern interpretation, that different paths can take us to the same goal.