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“Being together is not an option, it’s a necessity”

Stakeholder meeting “Strategic partnership at the area of medical education with focus on initiative educational content and higher relevance for the labour market (Medic)”

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Good morning.

Connecting online with Uniwersytet Jagielloński reminds me that Europeans from all over the continent have studied at this University since its creation in the 14th century. Kraków and the Jagiellonian University have always been a European microcosm. So actually, it is quite fitting to deliver a speech on Europe's future in a place so rooted in Europe's history.

As wrote a famed French historian Jacques Le Goff: "Historical reality has two sides. One is made up of facts, events, material realities, and one of the ideas, images and dreams." European history has always been about connecting these two sides.

The most recent example is the Conference on the Future of Europe, which is just taking place now. The Conference at its current stage of the Citizen Panels, is a visible attempt at forging unity among the people of Europe at the moment of internal challenges we face in Europe, unprecedented changes in the world and impacts they bring to our continent.

One of the participants in the Citizen Panels, a 20-something years old European citizen from Slovakia, said: "When I think of the lack of equal rights or climate change issues, I cannot sleep at night". These simple words express the state of mind of the young generation that expects from Europe not only to reduce their fears but to actively tackle the issues that generate those fears in the first place. They must be heard.

Last year, the pandemic became global practically overnight and affected us with a relative symmetry. In Europe, we responded quickly and I would say aggressively. We deployed unconventional policy tools: establishing an EU debt instrument or suspending our budgetary discipline rule, leading to very high levels of debt, to support our economies. ECB intensified the use of unconventional monetary policy instruments. As you can see several decades old European taboos have been put aside.

Today, majority of Recovery and Resilience (RR) plans of Member States have been adopted and first tranches of funds already paid. The EU is recovering better than anticipated.

I believe that the COVID-induced crisis teaches us that there is no longer one best way to do policymaking. Trust in “one policy fits all situations” prescription seems to be floating away. We see it in combination of European semester, policy coordination tool and implementation of RR plans.

At the heart of a strong and resilient EU also lies a stronger role of the euro as an international currency, allowing the EU to exercise greater influence in the global financial infrastructure, granting it greater autonomy, and render EU sanctions a stronger tool for deterrence and enforcement. And we are working on it.

Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, in an increasingly "digital" world and in a global setting of rising geopolitical rivalries, Europe's international trade policy was recently revised.

Based on the principle of "open strategic autonomy", the EU trade policy will allow EU to better leverage its extensive trade network and regulatory power to boost its industry, secure its supplies and increase its geopolitical influence as a champion of rules-based multilateral order.

Trade policy has always been one of the EU's strongest tool to enable competitiveness, growth, job creation and leverage its international influence. The good news is that in its new trade strategy, the EU chose to remain open and pursue rules-based international and multilateral cooperation.

What is indeed new in the European trade agenda is the increased assertiveness and attention paid to the enforcement of existing trade agreements. New regulations are in preparation or already deployed bringing a panoply of enforcement and defence trade and investment policy tools.

The pandemic which fell largely unexpectedly on our heads has exacerbated some trends that play an important role in shaping our mindset and Europe's future.

My first worry is that not enough has been done to convince citizens that what the European Union aims at is making globalization work for us. Not enough has been done to counter impacts of globalization on our societies. We all know globalization did help lift millions out of poverty, it did not prevent, however, inequality to grow in our economies and societies. This leads to lack of trust in public institutions, to calls for de-globalization and inward-looking policies.

To cope with failing connectivity between Europe and its citizens we must enhance trust and legitimacy at all levels of European governance. New forms of participatory democracy, new technologies, civic participation and grassroots innovations, such as the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe, can strengthen the resilience of our democratic systems. This is indeed crucial in the context of both global and intra EU developments.

Another important issue is related to the fact that the pandemic forced us to stop and look more carefully at the human impact on our environment, biodiversity, climate change and, more broadly, the future of our planet. Tackling climate change – which has been on the European policy agenda for nearly twenty years – is today a major element of EU strategic thinking. All levels of European governance are working toward the goal of making European economy climate neutral by 2050 and reducing emissions by 55% by 2030. Our response to climate change is tailored to make it the driving force behind our future well-being and competitiveness.

These goals are no longer aspirations or ambitions, but obligations laid down in the first European Climate Law that create new opportunities for innovation, investment and jobs. The Commission has just published their Fitfor55 package of proposals that aim to deliver the transformational change needed across our economy, society, and industry.

The heart of the EU's green transition is to bring benefits to all citizens as quickly and as fairly as possible, while strengthening our competitiveness, creating the jobs of tomorrow and effectively addressing the costs and impacts of the transition in a way that will not reduce and delay the benefits.

Another profound change shaping the future of our economies and societies is the

digital transformation, a crucial game changer and innovation driver which should also ensure fair competition and respect human rights.

What certainly matters for people is that the rise of digital technologies creates opportunities for well-paid and high-quality jobs in our economy. In this context, adapting our education to the new reality is a must in all member states, though not everywhere well understood.

This is a good moment to add that the EU is an important player in the global technological race, even though in the high tech, digital, AI, big data, and robotics fields, we need to make more efforts to catch up with the US and China.

Additionally, vulnerabilities in supply chains, including in the area of health, have to be seen in the context of geopolitical instability. We need a smart mix of research, industrial, and trade policies combined with trust-based international partnerships. On many issues, we are not there yet.

Another challenge worth mentioning is that emerging regulatory spaces linked to geopolitical competition will determine whether innovations and new standards will follow democratic values and ethics or the interest of authoritarian regimes. To that end, the EU and the US established last June the Trade and Technology Council. This new platform for transatlantic cooperation should bridge existing differences and build joint strategic agendas to counter Chinese influence and dominance in international organizations and in the high-tech sector.

This brings me to the issue of the global rise of China. There is an urgent need for like-minded democracies worldwide to effectively challenge China's state-capitalist model. China is developing new instruments for economic coercion. It is also changing its growth strategy to achieve economic self-reliance and geopolitical dominance. I think here of its dual-circulation strategy and overall decoupling strategy. This model affects the competitiveness of European companies at home and abroad and distorts the global level playing field.

In the current geopolitical situation, the Union needs to invest politically in creating common regulatory spaces rather than aiming at imposing our standards. The Brussels effect is not anymore as powerful as it was in the past. And over the last decades, China has boosted its influence in the UN and other international standard-setting bodies.

One thing is certain: the EU will not be able to curb China's coercive actions alone. Alignment with like-minded partners, starting with the United States, remains vital.

In this context let me reiterate our commitment to multilateralism. It is fundamental that multilateral institutions – which are not cast in stone – adapt and remain fit for purpose in our changing global environment.

When we think of the role of trade in shaping our future and the future of global relations in an interconnected world, it is clear that the world without a functioning World Trade Organization, with a fragmented trading system, would be a worrisome world. Finding a way to cooperate on reforming the WTO with the US should be amongst our most urgent priorities. But, the WTO rulebook not only needs to reflect the world that we currently live in; it must be fit for the future.

Allow me to say in this context few more words on where we are with our transatlantic relations.

This year we have made an effort to emerge from four years of nearly entirely dysfunctional relations with the US. The first months of the new administration were good for the relationship. Many US officials made their first overseas trips to Europe or met virtually with their counterparts and Joe Biden visited Brussels in June for the successful EU-US Summit.

The EU and the US have been particularly busy solving harmful legacy issues. We have been working actively to de-escalate trade tensions. Much has been done on both sides of the Atlantic in this context. We need to do more on what brings us together; especially as that there are still issues that tear us apart.

I think it is legitimate to say that while 2020 was a year of global disruption, 2021 is the year of European rebuilding. We deployed our energy into ensuring a post pandemic level playing field within the Union. European institutions, Member States, regions, businesses and citizens have been involved in putting forward the necessary building blocks to develop resilient economic and social systems.

We are working on reforming European governance, in particular completing and modernizing the architecture of the Economic and Monetary Union, completing our Banking Union, and boosting the development of our Capital Market Union. We are working on new approaches to fiscal discipline.

The pandemic made us aware of the need to invest more in a common European health policy and coordinate our preparedness and responses to public health emergencies.

These are just a few examples of arguments in response to the question of why do we need an integrated Europe. In a world full of uncertainty, where not everybody shares our values and our ethics, where multilateralism is under permanent threat, a united Europe is not an option, it is a necessity.

In today's multipolar world, acting in unison is the only way to ensure that Europe charts its own path following our common democratic values. We must be cohesive inside and united outside. This is the need of our time for the EU.

In this context, yesterday's ruling of the so-called Constitutional Tribunal in Poland is a threat to our togetherness. Being together is in particular a must when a call for change and an expectation of change can be heard and sensed across Europe.

New common steps will make Europe different but always faithful to its values, which inspired Europeans seventy years ago.

Thank you for your attention.