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**„Europe’s integration is not for its own vanity, it is for the people”**

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Your Excellency, Esteemed Guests, Fellow Panellists, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

Thank you for this opportunity to meet with you, to speak to you and to be able to look with you at Europe's integration in the light of geopolitical challenges. This is the topic that might occupy us for a long time to come. The world, indeed, finds itself at a very challenging moment. And it is restless. A “Great Reassessment” is under way. It is a time of great anxiety but also of an evident twitch for change. In any historical epoch such a moment is a risky one. It can either be a beginning of a Renaissance or lead humanity straight into the abyss. I think that Vienna - with Sigmund Freud’s tradition of psychoanalysis and with writers like Robert Musil, Stefan Zweig, or Elfriede Jelinek, who wrote about such historical convulsions – is a good place to talk about the unpredictability of history and about the inevitability of transformation.

The two "black swans”, the pandemic and the unthinkable-until not long ago war in Ukraine, arrived one after another. They forced us to fundamentally re-evaluate our way of thinking about the resilience of our democratic structures, institutions, values, political commitments, and the quality of our life. Europe is a place where this necessity of transformation is keenly perceived. In some places with existential dread, in others with hopes for a new unity, borne out of common response to the large scale existential threats.

How can this inevitable transformation be achieved? Is it viable to base our response on the individual capacities of Member States, as anti-European populists propose or is it rather that the challenges of the scale we face now can only be tackled together? Few would have doubts.

This is why an integrated Europe is geopolitically so important. It directly counteracts human’s subconscious retrograde impulse for breakdown, dissolution, and decay. In the light of geopolitical challenges an integrated Europe appears a deep democratic alliance in terms of commitments, determination, development of resources and unity in action. The EU was not designed to be a geopolitical animal. But now with this geopolitical turn, activating an assertive posture has become inevitable. Our reaction to the war has given birth to a geopolitical Europe. The reluctance in taking responsibility for the world seems gone to me. For good, I hope.

How did it happen?

The igniting spark was the nagging recognition that climate and then healthcare became pertinent to our survival. And then the war and protecting peace suddenly got back on the global agenda. This war dropped like a stone on a world already mightily polarized across various national, continental, political and social lines. The world that was on the brink of a collective nervous breakdown, due to 2 years of life under pandemic regime. The world in which there was a deep uncertainty, and doubt about the wisdom and quality of world political leadership. Europe had been also affected by the Brexit saga and Washington’s desire to decouple from our continent. Russia has shown itself, as the disruptor of the peace in Europe. It is obvious that its aggression has to be contained. In a relatively short time, it has absorbed many of our material resources and political capital. Some observers see the danger that the required sacrifices may induce geopolitical fatigue and thus reduce our societies’ willingness to look at other challenges. Russia unfortunately is not the only lonely wolf requiring attention of the international community. There are more of them out there. Now, it is legitimate to expect that the current understandable concentration on the war in Ukraine will not narrow our long-term geopolitical perspective.

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 the Chinese model. And the war in Ukraine is testing our capabilities to build global democratic alliances. China’s interaction with the world is based on an inward consolidation through unprecedented social and political control and an outward expansion based on merging economic and political pressure on developing countries, and a quest for unabashed dominance in the world. China’s economic model distorts the global level playing field. Their political model corrupts the worldwide prospects for democracy. When acting under pressure for solutions to current challenges brought by the aggression and happening in this context, we cannot feel free from the obligation to reflect about the future. Its main feature is uncertainty. We can’t be sure whether the global order with its institutional framework will even survive.

UN is the only truly global political framework we have. Russia, permanent member of the Security Council, has just turned into an unprecedented aggressor. There are countries important globally who pursue a “balanced” approach as they say. Allow me to quote Prime Minster of Mexico who declined to join sanctions and said “we are not going to take any sort of economic reprisal because we want to have good relations with all the governments of the world”. There is Pres. Bolsonaro, there is South Africa and many others. And then there is China. There is, in this context, the question who will sit at the post war table where future of global security architecture will be decided.

Big unknown is the future monetary system as the power of sanctions is based on the dominance of the dollar. There is a risk that dollar position can be undermined. Today renminbi role in the international trade is very limited, only 2% of global trade is priced in renminbi. The Chinese already say that they will help the world to get rid of the dollar hegemony. We will need a lot of thinking ahead on geopolitical reordering, on the impact on the world’s vulnerable, on competition between democracies and autocracies, on “friendshoring” in managing supply chains but how multipolar the world will be - nobody knows. The EU must reflect on this global transformation impact on its policies, both external and internal. A lot is at stake.

But I also believe that the EU is well placed to operate in such a multipolar world. Our values, our experience with bringing diversity into unity, our legislative power, strong business global networks, empowerment of our civil society, our capacity to build international alliances the fact that the EU functions at a far higher level of openness and global integration than others - all that should make us feel that we owe the rest of the world a strong engagement in bringing the post war world again - as much as possible - together. It is important, because many emergencies: political, trade, sustainability, food related ones require international cooperation Now, in face of the already identified challenges, the EU has already reviewed its policies aiming at serious re-balancing of our key geopolitical dossiers: industry, trade, energy and security. But we need more comprehensive actions, courageous moves on cutting off unhealthy ballast of dependencies on energy, critical raw materials, microchips, and many other supply chains related dependencies.

We have expanded our external dossiers, we fully understood how nimble instrument a trade policy can be. We can be more assertive on behalf of our citizens and businesses in ensuring a level playing field and encouraging the rest of the world to participate in our democratic standards and respect the rule of law. The EU has updated and upgraded its trade defense toolbox. It revised the enforcement regulation, the export control system, developed a foreign subsidies mechanism, established an FDI screening regulation, created the international procurement instrument, and is designing an anti-coercion instrument. We have also emerged from four years of totally dysfunctional relations with the US, especially on the trade front. We did not only normalize our relations with the US, we strengthened them. After solving our harmful legacy trade issues, we launched the Trade and Technology Council. This cooperation platform already proved to be a most useful tool at the beginning of the war, especially on export controls.

We are in a global technological race and it is increasingly important for the sake of our businesses' competitiveness and resilience that we tap into the potential of a close transatlantic regulatory space, in particular in the field of AI and emerging technologies. This is the outcome we want to see from the TTC. The good news is that the EU has decided to move forward on delivering security to its citizens. On the security front, while we have to establish as close relationships as possible with our partners – and here the transatlantic dimension is key –we cannot continue to outsource our security to our partners. We also need to consolidate our production and supply chains and make our economy a vital part of broadly understood security.

In a world full of uncertainty, where few share our values and ethics, and some actively attack them, where multilateralism is under permanent threat, a united Europe is not an option, it is a necessity.

In tomorrow’s multipolar world, acting in unison is the only way to ensure that Europe charts its own path following democratic values and asserting our autonomy. We must be cohesive inside and united outside. And here let’s pause for a moment, and ask ourselves: could any of us even imagine, 3 years back, that the EU would have had the courage and capacity, given our internal differences, to take up on itself a commitment and establish an unprecedented Recovery and Resilience Facility, based on abandoning one of the long term taboos and reaching out to the issuance of European bonds. And on the external front who could have expected this “slow” and “wary”, or even “cagey”, as some perceived us, Europe to unite so spectacularly on the response to the Russian aggression on Ukraine?

It surprised many that Europe can act so swiftly and united in perfect coordination with the US and other democracies. This was important to make sanctions effective. We could also clearly see what the change of administration in Washington meant for international politics. The challenge now is to keep this European commitment to unity. Looking at the conclusions from the last Summit on the last package of sanctions there is no denying that potentially hurtful fissures can be back. We should name and shame the defectors and limit their potential for damage. And not only on sanctions, but on other issues as well. In all the discussions on the integration of the EU and its external role, the concept of “open strategic autonomy” has gained wide currency. I see it as aspiration for courageous commitments and choices, as an ambitious defence undertaking, as necessary trade assertiveness, as building our own capabilities without delineating the limits of our global action, as our right to regulate and to make choices. Strategic autonomy’s aim should not be just about guaranteeing Europe’s economic, industrial, or defence potential. Nor should it be just about deterring the other powers from doing us harm. It is not about Europe closing in its ranks around few public goods pursued together. It is about meeting the challenges in a visionary way.

And it is in this context that I would like to mention enlargement. We all know that European enlargement policy has not only made Europe more relevant globally, it has expanded the European space of and for democracy President Macron’s idea of a “new European Community” that is “open to those who want to joint, but not closed to those who have left” and Enrico Letta’s “European confederation” with aspiring member countries that would begin with a shared “economic area,” gradually adding commitments and eventually including a common defence clause are, in my view, attempts at leveraging enlargement toward the direction of a slower process. Both ideas appeared in the context of Ukraine’s membership aspiration. I am not convinced by either of these proposals, about their value added to what already exists. And what is our European interest. It is visible to many that the criteria that were initially designed to bring new countries on board smoothly have in time evolved into an obstacle race with an ever-moving finish line, perceived to rather keep countries out for as long as possible. As a result, disappointment and skepticism have been growing in the candidate countries feeding the rhetoric of far-right parties. This is the case of Western Balkans. And we are twenty years after the Thessaloniki Summit.

The enlargement process has always encompassed more than just the particular moment of accession. In light of dramatically changed geopolitical circumstances enlargement path could be a more supple process, responsive to changing circumstances. I hope, in the mid-June Summit we will put Ukraine on the enlargement path.

We should ask ourselves a question: will Ukraine be an added value to the EU?

My answer is that Ukraine, while enlarging the democratic European space, in the long term will give the EU, geopolitically speaking, an additional weight in the global bargaining for status, resources and demography.

I have a feeling that many politicians in Europe, used to a status quo, are afraid of accepting Ukraine as an EU member. And the list of concerns exists. I can only hope that the fear of making Mr. Putin feel provoked is not on this list. We have to look into the EU’s past, when the Founding Fathers were faced with a more problematic case. Germany was the enemy that inflicted terrible scars on millions of people. But Schuman and Monnet took the bold risk of bringing the former enemy into the fold of democracy and freedom. And it was a resounding success. We, Europeans, were able to help our war enemy to become an equal partner in our common enterprise for peace. It would be a shame if we could not be there for Ukraine, which is the victim of brutal aggression and our ally for democracy, our friend and partner in making Europe a strong actor in the world.

It has to be said that “geopolitics” as a notion, as a discourse, and as a political practice of great powers does not have a great reputation. We are witnessing this discredited geopolitics in Ukraine where the aggressor grabs the land of another country and sets arbitrary borders completely ignoring international law. We, as the EU, have to make clear that our geopolitics is not of that kind. We, in Europe, understand it. However, I fear that people from other continents do not see this aggression as something else than just another case of traditional geopolitical conflict, in which all parties are equally guilty. When Pope Francis said “we are all guilty”, it caused great indignation in the Western part of the globe, but not elsewhere. I think the Pope does represent the view “from the periphery”. That means that one of our main task is getting the message across to others that have doubts.

How can we do it?

I think we need to put it in a broader framework of democratic struggle across the globe, link it to freedom loving people in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and doing more to provide hope to the African continent. We need to see this finest political settlement of the post WWII – which the EU was – as an evolving community that needs to be refined by each and every generation in order to fit those needs and dreams. In other words, we need to look at ourselves not by the glasses that correct the shortsightness only, but by the lenses of history. Our historical task is leaping forward, not muddling through history. As my good friend, Victoria Martin de la Torre, describes succinctly in her book, European integration was an epoch-making “leap into the unknown”. The Founding Fathers and Mothers of the Union saw with clarity that post-World War II Europe needed a new start. If Monnet and Schuman were alive today, they would certainly feel the same now. They would tell us that unity is not an option, it is a necessity. Only a cohesive Union can be a leader and a balancing actor in world affairs. It is obvious, though, that the following generations also added their own insights into how we should proceed with the project of European integration. In the beginning it was an elite project: small number of member states and the population. And, of course, the second half of Europe, divided by the Iron Curtain, did not belong in the EU. We stayed on the other bank of the river, like Spain and Portugal, till we successfully transformed ourselves into democracies. Now the EU is a pan-European community. It is not only an idea, but also a reality.

Members States and EU institutions are its vital part. But they are here at the service of the European people. The EU, to be successful, must be legitimate to the people. Only a citizen-centered Union can be a Union fit for the future. I don’t think it is too idealistic but, indeed, we have to look pragmatically at the world as it stands. Globalization is not dead but it’s getting a hard look and will evolve. Autocracies are gaining popular support. The global economy is struggling under the post-pandemic and post sanctions tremors. If we want to make our most ambitious plans a reality, we need the European public opinion on our side, prepared to counter the flows of lies and disinformation produced by the autocratic regime, and Putin regime in particular.

The Green Deal, Fit for 55, RepowerEU, and digitalization are ambitious projects that will not be easy to execute. The problem is that the benefits those programs offer may be felt only after their costs hit the public at large. Populists see this as a promising political gap that they can use to stop the European project in its tracks. I think that most of Euro sceptics have abandoned their objective of leaving the EU and instead aim at changing it from within. Once again, we are at a crossroad moment for the future of the Union.

And it is good that the Conference on the Future of Europe, so much despised and discredited by the autocrats and populists, took place just now. It provided a political backing to the project of a new and more ambitious EU. It showed citizens’ real expectations. The plans for remaking the Union are no longer seen as just a technocratic blueprint for the future, but as a project that has a double legitimacy: from the people of Europe and from the institutions. It has to be noted, though, that the legitimacy gained from citizens is not a blank check. Citizens will not be satisfied by empty promises. They need results. They clearly said in their recommendations from the Conference that they want to increase the citizens’ role in the European decision-making. They want to remove the roadblocks from making Europe effective.

Citizens approached some institutional sacred cows, decades old taboos with fresh eyes and irreverence. The need for treaty changes seemed obvious for citizens. Especially when it comes to unanimity, creation of a health Union or shared competences in education. I must say that it is quite remarkable, how much the EU delivered without formal changes of competences during the past years. It says that there is unused space in the Treaties But Europe cannot continue to depend on the good will of some Member States or a lack thereof, for much longer. In a situation of prolonged uncertainties, we see what a terrible brake unanimity can be to implement our long-term goals. The recent EU Summit rotten compromise on the 6th sanction package is a prime example of our ongoing decision-making problems. We cannot continue to constantly accommodate obstructers like Poland and Hungary. This does not benefit citizens. We cannot allow our homegrown autocrats to laugh at the face of those who want to move forward. If we fail to end with that archaic, non-democratic principle of unanimity, we will have to resign ourselves to continuation of muddling through, which has always been the least favorable option for Europe’s regaining its natural leadership role in the world. There is a chance that the Convention can be a historical moment where the EU will be improved for the future.

If the EU gets rid of unanimity in decision-making, increases the role of the European Parliament, institutes Citizens’ Assemblies as a permanent feature, and imprints on the Council a new way of thinking that copes with common goods, issues not respecting borders, citizens, security, a new European Union will be born. I hope the Convention will be allowed to happen. Europeans want to influence global affairs as citizens of the world. A Union of global ambition should be our goal. Europe’s integration is not for its own vanity, it is for the people.

Thank you for your kind attention.