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***„Shaping a New Narrative: Women’s Leadership in a Changing World”***

**Summer School for Female Leadership in the Digital Age**

**Inaugural Ceremony**

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Thank you for the invitation, it is good to be back in Valencia. But it has been also an opportunity to meet my two compatriots, Zuzanna and Marta, both with breathtaking achievements in their professional life. I am proud of you.

I would like to start with few words related to the invasion of Ukraine. Let me quote a piece of a remarkable text by a late Polish song writer and poet, Wojciech Młynarski. He says that when his daughter, seeing the dead and the wounded on the TV screen, asks if the war will come, and he replies that the war is far away, he knows he is lying. War is never far away. War is always very close.

I think that today we are all with our hearts and thoughts with the women of Ukraine - those who are suffering in shelled cities, hiding with their kids from bombs, and those on the refugee trail. The suffering of Ukrainian women, their unimaginable fears for their loved ones, is accompanied by a nagging uncertainty about the future.

European integration grew out of the ashes of two World Wars in order to never allow wars and destruction of Europe. Through its history Europe has bled enough. The fathers, also some overlooked or generally forgotten mothers of European integration, wanted to escape from this history. They wanted next generations to live a life of peace. Unfortunately, we all know that there will always be some historical equivalents of Putin that will use again the chance of taking peace away from us.

To reduce this risk, we need to shift our political thinking toward concern for common public goods, away from policies based on putting up walls and barbed wires. And I trust that this can open the public sphere to a greater presence of women.

In the geopolitically polarized world of technological race we must spare no effort to boost social sensitivity, empathy and appreciation of vital interests of the communities in which we live. And trust should become the main currency of the new social order. So I hope that it is not by accident we see currently in Europe more women than ever holding top leadership positions.

But it is not just politics that's changing. Business is changing, with women demanding greater representation in green leadership. The culture is changing, its tone is now increasingly set by the "revolution of tenderness", mentioned by the Polish Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk. Societies are learning to be more collaborative, because the challenges we face are planet-wide. And there is no planet B. It is interesting that those who understand the climate crisis best are young people and women. It was a young woman, Greta Thunberg, who drew the world's attention to this problem, in an unconventional, even challenging way.

Today only 17% of global population lives in democracy, respecting its fundamental principles and laws. But I am an optimist, and I think that the era of populism and demagogy is slowly coming to an end. And I wish all of us here to be in the leadership of these changes, to play an active role in setting for the society the course to take. We should do it with courage and trust in the collective wisdom of women as the driving force in this ongoing re-evaluation of our relations with the Earth, with other people, with the whole world.

Your generation has no other option but to be ready to provide the innovative leadership for the new challenging times. It is also true that you have the right to expect from your elders to give you for this travel forward all the necessary support you need.

In today's, quite unpredictable world, where the labor market changes quickly, some professions disappear and new ones are created, expectations regarding skills are constantly growing. What used to be seen yesterday as an intellectual passion or a personal hobby, suddenly becomes "saleable" on a very competitive labor market. An entrepreneur said to me "We employ philosophers to tell us not only whether a given product makes sense on the market, but whether it should exist at all".

It is also clear that we need a major change in education. And it is not only about advancing our children's digital competences, but also about a different way of interacting in the digital ecosystem, about preparing us to navigate in it, about distinguishing fake news, not succumbing to algorithmic manipulation, learning where digitization can help us and where it brings risks and dangers.

Your initiative creates a support network that can help young women to see themselves in the leadership position in this new digital world and the labor market that it creates. The digital reality is the new frontier, and in many ways, there is no reason not to see women in leadership.

I am seeing in front of me a group of incredible female individuals with limitless potential and the power to shape the future. We are pivoting to a new world, where your voices, your ideas, and your leadership can be a critical game changer. You may and you will face challenges on your leadership path. Society may still hold onto outdated stereotypes and biases, attempting to define what you can or cannot achieve. But I am sure you will overcome these limits. When I look at your achievements it is clear that the time has come to break free from those constraints, break through the ceilings and walls and show the world what you are truly capable of. I am sure you take seriously the buzz line “yes, we can”.

I mentioned already the importance of education. It is, indeed, a tool that empowers all of us to make informed decisions, develop critical thinking skills, and expand our horizons. Education is the key to unlocking doors and creating a solid foundation for your leadership journey.

I know how difficult it is to make female voice heard. So I urge you to embrace the power of your voice. Speak up, share your thoughts, and be unapologetically yourself. Be assertive in demonstrating your unique perspectives and your experience. I can assure you that once you get through with your insights they will be seen as invaluable. Once heard, your ideas have the potential to spark change, inspire others, and create a ripple effect that can transform communities and societies.

Your leadership does not require a specific title or formal authority position. I am sure many of you experienced moments when your open mindset allowed you to be

proactive, make a positive impact and eventually take initiative. Sometimes, however, even when we are well prepared to embrace the leadership opportunities that come our way, both big and small, we allow others to take this chance away from us. And there are many studies explaining why we do it. So, stop doing it. Don't allow the gate keepers to do it to you. What you have already achieved, what you know, tools you dominate allow you to leverage them to expand your reach, connect with others, and create positive change.

Learning from others is something I have always appreciated in my life. You can call this mentoring, role modeling. I call it learning from others. For me it is about sharing and it takes two to make it work. And it is not at all easy. That is why I would like to encourage you to look around to identify those who can be a source of inspiration for you. And who can be your partner, because there are barriers to overcome. And it is also easier if you do not do it alone.

Frequently, mental barriers do not allow women to present themselves as candidates for leaders. Mental barriers exist amongst rank and file in both public and private institutions. Mental barriers exist among public at large. So in reality a counteroffensive is needed at all those levels.

And then there is this famous boring line that I have heard so many times in my life: it would be great to have a female leader but there are no candidates fit for purpose. Often it means that women with adequate number of years of practicing are missing. Sometimes, to fix it, all it would require is a change in a piece of internal regulation, in rules which had been established through political decisions in which women did not participate. This is clear that to see more women in leadership positions tomorrow we need to do more for women's carriers today.

I also believe that in today's world support does not come mainly from formal mentors or role models. I see a huge potential in mutually supportive actions coming from networks of peers who share aspirations, values and experience. Actually a big part of your strength comes from networking. You can learn from each other, offer mutual support and encouragement to reach new heights.

You come from various walks of life but you share aspirations. And I think the issues you care about matter for all of people. I know that you see those who need help. So here you are with the mission to deliver to the benefit of all.

There is evidence that women's leadership results in greater responsiveness to citizens' needs. And this matters strongly for digital transition which should leave no one behind. We must also bear in mind that on the demand side of the digital pivot there is a growing number of women.

Some of you have established positions; have a history of achievements and visibility. But some might have been on the margin, working hard without appreciation, being victims of remnant ideas and taboos which freeze pre existing inequalities and boost new ones. When I talk to you I am convinced your networking will fix it. Somebody said that leadership is not a destination, but an ongoing process of learning and growing. Networks of peers can help overcome fear of risking, strengthen resilience and reduce mental barriers.

I am sure you often hear from the experienced people that failure is a stepping stone on your journey to success. It can be. It is up to you. Networking can help embracing failure, learn from it, and give you courage and determination to keep moving forward.

Leadership can be demanding and overwhelming at times, and you might agree with me that in particular in the digital world the risk of striking the wrong balance between your work and your private life is high. I am sure your families and friends encourage you to look for a good balance in your life. It is essential not only for your health and private life comfort but also for the sustainability of your leadership ambition. So take care of yourselves, because in this profession you are also permanently facing the need to grasp new emerging challenges.

I would finish with a few words on my life. I had a rather comprehensive education, with ancient Greek and Latin, and some modern languages, but also with a lot of elements of law, history, and sociology in addition to the mainstream economics. And then I assumed I will spend my life working at the university because at that time the political reality was rather discouraging and the work at the university allowed me to develop my interests in the open world. I used my time to achieve all scientific

degrees and then history intervened. Poland embarked on a double transition, to market economy and democracy on the one hand and to anchoring itself in NATO and EU on the other. And I was prepared for these new challenges. I was in the right moment in the right place with the right knowledge and mindset. And when the question was asked, who can do it, I raised my hand. And I did it many times in my professional life. I have always been on a public mission, in Poland, in Geneva and in Brussels. Bringing Poland first to the OECD and then the EU. Running the UN Economic Commission for Europe, becoming European Commissioner and finally member of the European Parliament. Caring about gender equality, being among those who established in Poland the Congress of Women and its Shadow Cabinet where I am a prime minister. I have always focused on doing things that I believed had to be done and that others saw as too difficult.

Your life choices might be different than mine. It seems to me that the once very fashionable word "career" is starting to change its meaning. More and more young people, especially women I meet tend to talk about work for the common good, related to their personal aspirations. I will keep my fingers crossed for your success and I hope our mission paths will cross again.