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Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session by Ursula von der Leyen, Candidate for President of the European Commission

Strasbourg, 16 July 2019

Mr President,

Honourable Members,

Exactly 40 years ago, Simone Veil was elected as the first female President of the European Parliament and set out her vision for a fairer and more united Europe.

It is thanks to her, and to all the other European icons, that I am presenting my vision of Europe to you today.

And 40 years later, I can say with great pride that **we finally have a female candidate for European Commission President.**

I am that candidate thanks to all the men and women who have broken down barriers and defied convention. I am that candidate thanks to all the men and women who built a Europe of peace, a united Europe, a Europe of values.

It is this belief in Europe that has guided me throughout my life and my career — as a mother, as a doctor and as a politician.

It is the courage and daring of pioneers such as Simone Veil that are at the heart of my vision for Europe.

And it is my intention to lead the European Commission in that same spirit.

Mr President,

Honourable Members,

The founding fathers and mothers of Europe created something powerful out of the rubble and ashes of the world wars. Peace.

A strong common market, borderless trade, travel, research and jobs. Today, 500 million Europeans live in freedom and prosperity, from Riga to Limassol and from Athens to Lisbon.

My children's generation cannot conceive of a life without this sense of Europe as their home. When this fortunate generation was born, we, the older generation, thought that it would always be so.

Yet it is now clear to each and every one of us that we must once again take a stand and fight for our Europe. The whole world is being challenged by disruptive developments that have not passed Europe by.

Demographic change, globalisation of the world economy, rapid digitalisation of our working environment and, of course, climate change. None of these meta-developments is new: science predicted them a long way back. What is new is that we, as citizens of Europe — irrespective of the country in which we live — are feeling and experiencing their effects first hand.

Whether it is Finnish wheat farmers facing drought or the French facing a deadly heatwave: we are all feeling quite clearly the effects of climate change. Whether it is Irish pensioners that have to get to grips with online banking or Polish workers with 20 years' experience having to undergo further training in order to avoid being laid off: we are all feeling the concrete effects of digitalisation. Whether it is regions in Europe in which schools, hospitals or companies are having to close down: we are all feeling the concrete effects of demographic change.

All of this has left people with a feeling of losing control. Of looser ties within our communities. None of these challenges will go away. But there have been different ways to react to these trends. Some are turning towards authoritarian regimes, some are buying their global influence and creating dependencies by investing in ports and roads. And others are turning towards protectionism.

None of these options are for us. **We want multilateralism, we want fair trade, we defend the rules-based order** because we know it is better for all of us. **We have to do it the European way.** But if we are to go down the European path, we must first rediscover our unity. **If we are united on the inside, nobody will divide us from the outside.**

If we close the gaps between us, we can turn today's challenges into tomorrow's opportunities.

A European Union that strives for more

Our most pressing challenge is keeping our planet healthy. This is the greatest responsibility and opportunity of our times. **I want Europe to become the first climate-neutral continent in the world by 2050.** To make this happen, we must take bold steps together. Our current goal of reducing our emissions by 40% by 2030 is not enough.

We must go further. We must strive for more. A two-step approach is needed to **reduce CO2 emissions by 2030 by 50, if not 55%.** The EU will lead international negotiations to increase the level of ambition of other major economies by 2021. Because to achieve real impact, we do not only have to be ambitious at home – we have to do that, yes – but the world has to move together.

To make this happen, I will put forward **a Green Deal for Europe** in my first 100 days in office. I will put forward the first ever **European Climate Law** which will set the 2050 target into law.

This increase of ambition will need investment on a major scale. Public money will not be enough. I will propose a **Sustainable Europe Investment Plan** and turn parts of the European Investment Bank into a **Climate Bank**. This will unlock €1 trillion of investment over the next decade.

It means change. All of us and every sector will have to contribute, from aviation to maritime transport to the way each and everyone of us travels and lives. **Emissions must have a price that changes our behaviour.** To complement this work, and to ensure our companies can compete on a level-playing field, I will introduce a **Carbon Border Tax** to avoid carbon leakage.

But what is good for our planet must also be good for our people and our regions. Of course I know about the importance of cohesion funds. But we need more. We need a just transition for all. Not all of our regions have the same starting point – but we all share the same destination. This is why I will propose a **Just Transition Fund** to support those most affected.

This is the European way: we are ambitious. We leave nobody behind. And we offer perspectives. If we want to succeed with this ambitious plan we need a strong economy. Because what we want to spend we need to earn first.

For that we need to strengthen the backbone of our economies: the **small and medium-sized enterprises.** They are innovative, they are entrepreneurial, they are flexible and agile, they create jobs, they provide vocational training to our youth. But they can only do all this if they have access to capital everywhere in this huge Single market. Let's get rid of all the barriers. Let's open the door. Let's finally complete the **Capital Markets Union.** Our SMEs deserve it.

And we need to work within the **Stability and Growth Pact.** Where investment and reforms are needed, we should make sure they can be done. We should make use of all the flexibility allowed in the rules. We are proud of our economy. We want to make it stronger.

But there is also a clear and simple logic. It's not people that serve the economy. It's the economy that serves our people. In our Social Market Economy we must reconcile the market with the social. Therefore I will **refocus our European Semester to make sure we stay on track with our Sustainable Development Goals.**

And **I will stand for fair taxes** – whether for brick and mortar industries or digital businesses. When the tech giants are making huge profits in Europe, this is fine because we are an open market and we like competition. But if they are making these profits by benefiting from our education system, our skilled workers, our infrastructure and our social security, if this is so, it is not acceptable that they make profits, but they are barely paying any taxes because they play our tax system. If they want to benefit, they have to share the burden.

Making the most of Europe's potential

Honourable Members,

The European way is also about using all of our potential: our people, our talent, our diversity. It is about creating a fairer and more equal Union. This will drive me forward every single day I am in office – as it has throughout my career.

We have come a long way since I was a minister for family affairs and had to fight to introduce parental pay or access to childcare for families. But the fight for fairness never stops. It is still too difficult for hard working families to make ends meet in Europe. I want to ensure that work pays. In a Social Market Economy, every person that is working full time should earn a **minimum wage** that pays for a decent living. Therefore we will develop a framework, of course in respect of the different labour markets. But I think the optimal option is to have collective bargaining by employers' unions and trade unions because they tailor the minimum wage to the sector or to the region necessary. Of course I am aware there are different models, but we have to create the framework. And I want better protection for those who lose their jobs when our economy takes a severe hit. A **European Unemployment Benefit Reinsurance Scheme** will support our economies and our people in times of external shocks. Of course there are national unemployment insurances but a reinsurance scheme for these heavy external shocks is needed in Europe.

I also want more equality and fairness for our young people. Youth unemployment is at 14.2% in Europe, but ranges from 5% to 40% in some countries. We cannot accept this. Young people have aspirations, they want to work, they want to have a future – and it is our job to let them achieve this. This is why I will make sure the **Youth Guarantee**, which I started when I was a minister for labour affairs in our Council, is working as well as it can in every Member State. And I will support the European Parliament's idea to triple the Erasmus+ budget as part of the next long-term budget.

We have to care for the most vulnerable: our children. We have to fight poverty. I know as a mother of seven that it makes a difference for their entire life if children have access to education, sports, music, healthy food and to a loving environment. We need a **Child Guarantee** to help ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty and social exclusion has access to the most basic of rights like healthcare and education. It will empower them and it pays tremendously if we back them when they are young. This is part of my action plan to bring our **Pillar of Social Rights** to life.

And I will start at home by example: I will ensure **full gender equality in my College of Commissioners**. If Member States do not propose enough female Commissioners, I will not hesitate to ask for new names. Since 1958 there have been 183 Commissioners. Only 35 were women. That is less than 20%. We represent half of our population. **We want our fair share**. We also need to talk openly about violence against women. If 1 in 5 women have already suffered physical or sexual violence in the European Union and 55% of women have been sexually harassed, this is clearly not a women's issue. I will propose to **add violence against women on the list of EU crimes defined in the Treaty**. And the European Union should join the Istanbul Convention.

I am convinced: if we close the gaps between us, we will emerge stronger as a Union.

Defending Europe's values

Honourable Members,

The cradle of our European civilisation is Greek philosophy and Roman Law. And our European continent went through its darkest period when we were ruled by dictators and Rule of Law was banished. For centuries, Europeans fought so hard for their liberty and independence.

The Rule of Law is our best tool to defend these freedoms and to protect the most vulnerable in our Union. **This is why there can be no compromise when it comes to respecting the Rule of Law**. There never will be. I will ensure that we use our full and comprehensive toolbox at European level. In addition, I fully support an **EU-wide Rule of Law Mechanism**. To be clear: the new instrument is not an alternative to the existing instruments, but an additional one.

The Commission will always be an independent guardian of the Treaties. Lady Justice is blind – she will defend the Rule of Law wherever it is attacked.

Honourable Members,

The Rule of Law is universal. It applies to all. In the last five years, more than 17,000 people have

drowned in the Mediterranean, which has become one of the deadliest borders in the world. At sea there is the duty to save lives and in our Treaties and conventions there is the legal and moral duty to respect the dignity of every human being.

The European Union can and must defend these values. **The European Union needs humane borders. We must save, but saving alone is not enough.** We must reduce irregular migration, we must fight smugglers and traffickers – it is organised crime –, we must preserve the right to asylum and improve the situation of refugees, for example through humanitarian corridors in close cooperation with the UNHCR. We need empathy and decisive action.

I am aware of how difficult and divisive discussions on this issue are. We need to address the legitimate concerns of many and look at how we can overcome our differences. I will propose a **New Pact on Migration and Asylum**, including the **relaunch of the Dublin reform**.

This will allow us to return to a **fully functioning Schengen Area** of free movement, the key driver of our prosperity, security and freedoms. A centrepiece in this ambition is a **reinforced European Border and Coast Guard Agency**. We need to reach a standing corps of 10,000 Frontex border guards not by 2027, but way earlier, at least by 2024.

We have to modernise our asylum system. A Common European Asylum System must be exactly that – common. We can only have stable external borders if we give enough help to Member States facing the most pressure because of where they are on the map.

We need solidarity. We all need to help each other and contribute. We need a new way of burden-sharing. And we must make fair cooperation offers to countries of origin and transit which are in the interests of both sides. Diplomacy, economic development, investment, stability and security are needed so that people have a perspective.

I would like to tell you a story about perspective. Four years ago, I was lucky enough to welcome a 19-year old refugee from Syria into my home and my family. He spoke no German and was deeply scarred by his experience of civil war and flight. Today, 4 years later, he is fluent in German, English and Arabic. He is a community leader by day, in vocational training and a student for his high school degree by night. He is an inspiration for us all. One day, he wants to go home.

A responsible leader in the world

Honourable Members,

As a Defence Minister, I have been many times in this war-torn neighbourhood. I will never forget the words of former President of Iraq Masoum, who said: *We want to see more Europe here.* **The world is calling for more Europe.** The world needs more Europe.

I believe Europe should have a stronger and more united voice in the world – and it needs to act fast. That is why **we must have the courage to take foreign policy decisions by qualified majority.** And to stand united behind them.

The cornerstone of our collective defence will always be NATO. **We will stay transatlantic and we have to become more European.** This is why we created the **European Defence Union**. Our work for our European Union of security and defence is embedded in comprehensive security. Stabilisation always comes with diplomacy, reconciliation and reconstruction.

Our servicemen and servicewomen work side by side with police officers, diplomats and development aid workers. These men and women deserve our utmost respect and recognition for their tireless service for Europe.

I cannot talk about Europe without talking about our friends from the **United Kingdom**. For the very first time in 2016 a Member State decided to leave the European Union. This is a serious decision. We regret it, but we respect it. Since then, together with the current government of the United Kingdom, the European Union has worked hard to organise the orderly departure of the United Kingdom.

The Withdrawal Agreement concluded with the government of the United Kingdom provides certainty where Brexit created uncertainty: in preserving the rights of citizens and in preserving peace and stability on the island of Ireland. These two priorities are mine, too.

However, I stand ready for a **further extension of the withdrawal date**, should more time be required for a good reason. In any case, the United Kingdom will remain our ally, our partner and our friend.

A new push for European democracy

Honourable Members,

When I came to Strasbourg 13 days ago, I promised I'd come to listen. I have heard your concerns, your hopes and your expectations. The Political Guidelines which I will send you today reflect our discussions. From what I have heard, I have drawn my conclusions and I have made my decisions.

First, **I want European citizens to play a leading and active part in building the future of our Union.** I want them to have their say at a **Conference on the Future of Europe**, to start in 2020 and run for two years.

Second, **I want us to work together to improve the Spitzenkandidaten system.** We need to make it more visible to the wider electorate and we need to address the issue of transnational lists at the European elections as a complementary tool of European democracy.

And third – yes, **I support a right of initiative for the European Parliament.** When this House, acting by majority of its Members, adopts Resolutions requesting the Commission to submit legislative proposals, I commit to responding with a legislative act in full respect of the proportionality, subsidiarity, and better law-making principles.

I am convinced that our stronger partnership will further help to make people's voices heard.

Europe's promise

Mr President,

My father was 15 years old when the horrific war that, through the actions of my country, wrought death, destruction, displacement and devastation on our continent, came to an end.

He often talked about it to his children: to me and my six brothers and sisters.

Above all he stressed how important it was to him that other countries reached out to us again and welcomed us back into the fold of democratic nations. He started out at the European Coal and Steel Community and what he said to us at the beginning was,

'We are trading with one other again and when countries trade they build up friendships, and friends do not shoot one another'.

He was head of cabinet to von der Groeben in the Hallstein Commission and, later, DirectorGeneral for Competition. **That is why I was born in Brussels as a European, finding out only later that I am German with roots in Lower Saxony. And that is why there is only one option for me: to unite and strengthen Europe.**

Anyone that is with me in wanting to see Europe grow stronger and to flourish and blossom can count on me as a fervent supporter. However, anyone that wants to weaken or divide Europe or rob it of its values will find in me a bitter opponent.

When my father was old and reaching the end of his life, his narrative on Europe changed. He no longer spoke as much about the war. He said, *'Europe is like a long marriage. The love does not increase after the first day, but it deepens'.* Because we know that we can count on one another both in good times and bad. Because we know that we may argue but we can make up again. Because we never forget why we entered into the union in the first place.

All of us in this room live in a Europe that has grown, matured and become strong with its 500 million inhabitants. More than 200 million people went to the polls. This Europe has influence. It wants to take on responsibility for itself and the world.

That is not always easy — I know that — it is painful and exhausting, but it is our most noble duty! People want to see that we can deliver and move forward. Our young people are crying out for that. My children say to me, quite rightly, *'Do not play for time — use the time to get things done'.*

That is my mission. And in that I need your help and support. I am calling on all Europeans to get involved. It is the most precious thing we have: **es lebe Europa, vive l'Europe, long live Europe!**

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Press contacts:

[Mina ANDREEVA](mailto:mina.andreeva@ec.europa.eu) (+32 2 299 13 82)

General public inquiries: [Europe Direct](https://european-council.europa.eu/european-council/en/press) by phone [00 800 67 89 10 11](tel:0080067891011) or by [email](mailto:press@ec.europa.eu)

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