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Health and Food Safety

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Mr. President, Honourable Members,

It is a great honour for me to stand here today, as a part of Jean Claude Juncker's team, before the democratically elected representatives of the people of Europe, to exchange views with you; and to seek your approval for my nomination as European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety.

Let me start by telling you something about myself – who I am, my experience, and why I feel that you can trust me.

I spent the first six years of my life in one of Stalin's Gulags, high above arctic circle, in Siberia. I was born there in a family of deported Lithuanian civil servants. Like my father, from my youth, I have fought against Soviet suppression of human rights. I have cherished the truth, fairness and equality.

I was twice detained and investigated by the KGB. I fought for Lithuania's Independence; and I am proud to be one of the authors of my country's Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

For me, a fighter against totalitarian regime and extremism, the European Union is a commitment to European values. I am proud of the achievements of integration: peace, democracy, social justice, prosperity. I have found my natural home in the political philosophy of social democracy.

I am no stranger to Brussels. I led the Lithuanian delegation in the Convention on the Future of Europe under Giscard d'Estaing. Juliano Amato and Jean-Luc Dehane taught me how to build compromise in Europe. I am well acquainted with a good number of the current leadership of the European Union.

Honorable Members of Parliament

I studied medicine, and I am a surgeon by profession.

For 23 years, my job was about saving lives. I care passionately about people, about giving them the opportunity to lead healthier, safer, better lives. This is why, in May this year, I was elected Vice-President of the World Health Assembly.

My other passion is history. I have studied it and I have lived through a lot of it. From the Gulag to the Commissioner-designate is quite a long way to travel in one short life.

And, of course, I am a politician – proud to have been elected six times, in every election since 1990 by the constituents of my Vilnius district.

I have served people as Deputy Speaker of the Lithuanian Parliament; as Chair and Vice Chair of its EU Affairs and Social Affairs Committees; and as Minister of Health. And I am proud that my nomination to serve in the Commission was endorsed by a clear majority vote in the Lithuanian Parliament.

Allow me now to mention some of the main policy priorities on which I would aim to focus over the next 5 years.

Promoting Europe's economic recovery is a key objective, and I am convinced that health and food safety policies can make a significant contribution.

Let me start with **health**.

Health is a key element of social market economy. I believe we need "**a new boost for Health in Europe**".

Spending on health is not just "expenditure". Timely and universal access to care and medicines are **investments in human capital and productivity**. We must think beyond financial expenditure and gain. We must think about people's health as a **key asset for society**.

This is why I will support pooling Member States' efforts to invest in health and save lives. **Together we can do more; together we can work better and help people live healthy lives.**

I will work closely with Member States to help them improve the efficiency and sustainability of their health systems, so that they can provide **equitable access to care to all citizens**. To this end, I will develop expertise on health systems performance assessment.

Supporting **universal health coverage, strengthening primary care, improving quality and safety, promoting e-Health** – these are just a few things I will work on.

My priorities for Public Health are indeed – promotion, prevention, protection – for all.

I plan to further enhance **prevention**. The more health systems focus on prevention now, the less they will pay in treatment in fifteen or twenty years' time.

I am not here to tell people to quit smoking or not to drink. **I am here to say how much better life can be without smoking and without alcohol abuse**. Promotion of healthy lifestyle is of utmost importance.

If I earn your trust, I will also do everything in my power to **protect citizens from any health or food crisis that may arise**.

I will ensure that the EU's emergency preparedness capabilities remain in good shape to fight rapidly any crisis that can impact on health.

The **Ebola** outbreak serves as a stark reminder of the damage that contagious diseases can cause; and here we need to **help those in need** wherever they are.

We also need to help those within us, and **bridge the health divide** in Europe. My work **will be driven by the values of equity and solidarity**. **I believe in health for all and all for health**.

Finally, I want to see **EU legislation delivers results to citizens**. Full implementation of the **Cross border healthcare** Directive is the must. You can count on me to **champion patients' rights** in this regard.

I will also follow closely the transposition of the **Tobacco Products Directive**, and take forward work on the necessary implementing laws.

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Let me now turn to **food safety**.

The **EU has a well-developed food safety policy**. But we need to remain vigilant and prepared for crisis.

My priority is to ensure that European citizens continue **to enjoy the safest food in the world**. We need **safe food to keep citizens in good health**.

Our food safety standards are also an asset for European producers to compete on the global market.

I want to assess where we can genuinely simplify our food safety rules.

The food sector is one of Europe's biggest economic sectors; and can contribute to job creation and greater prosperity – in particular for small and medium enterprises which make up the backbone of the food sector.

We also have to look at the healthy food issue – because this is one of the factors on which people's health depends.

I will seize every opportunity to **maintain and improve this system**, working actively with **all stakeholders**. Everybody has a role to play in this, from the individual producers and operators to the European legislator; and **everybody benefits**.

Recent history has shown how quickly confidence in food can be undermined by fraud. I will be rigorous in ensuring that we have the appropriate tools to limit the scope for fraud, and a level playing field for all operators.

I will review, within the first six months of the mandate, **the decision-making process for genetically modified organisms (GMOs)**, in the line with President-elects Juncker's political guidelines. I will also pursue the on-going discussions on the **GMO cultivation proposal**.

I will examine seriously a number of proposals being debated in the Parliament and in the Council. Let me mention in particular the **package of measures on animal health, plant health and official controls** – which seek to simplify our laws in tune with the strong better regulation ethos of the incoming Commission.

President, Honourable Members,

To conclude, if I am appointed, I will work in an open and transparent manner.

Having been elected six times to a national Parliament, I see the European Parliament as a **key partner**.

Finally, let me say that I stand ready to **serve the people, the choice I have made more than 40 years ago and never regretted**.

If I earn your trust, I will work **for** the citizens **with** the citizens, in close dialogue with citizens' direct representatives – you, this Parliament.

Together, I believe we can **bring Europe closer to our citizens** and achieve better health in Europe.

We all know the European Parliament's motto- "**this time it's different**". **Let's do it!**

Thank you.