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INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER-DESIGNATE

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Health and Food Safety

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Check against Delivery
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.

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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.

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 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.