



Opening remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michel following the meeting of the European Council of 23 March 2023

Brussels, 23 March 2023

Indeed, we had a broad range of topics we discussed. And I want to highlight four topics that we talked about today. The first one is the fight against climate change; the attempt to limit global warming, which we discussed intensively with António Guterres. And indeed, the latest IPCC climate report that was published, I think, on Monday this week is a stark reminder of the progress of global warming. And it was very clear in this discussion that we are aware of the fact that, yes, the long-term goals are important, but what is even more important is action now and to accelerate. Good news in a bitter story is that the European Union is on track. You know that we have our European Green Deal that is the overall vision, but we also have our clear targets cast in a Climate Law, that is Fit for 55, that pave the way to climate neutrality by 2050. And here, we are on track. Compared to the figures of the IPCC, we are overshooting. That is good and it is absolutely necessary. In the last year, the global greenhouse gas emissions have increased by 1%. We have been able last year, despite the energy crisis, to decrease our greenhouse gas emissions by 2.5%. But of course, there is a lot of work ahead of us. We have made significant progress on many of the proposals of Fit for 55. But now we need to agree on the remaining ones to stay on track in this field.

The second point we discussed with the Secretary-General, but also in an extra round, was on Ukraine. It was a very good and intense debate. There is one topic that is especially important to me, that is the case of abducted Ukrainian children. It is a horrible reminder of the darkest times of our history, what is happening there, to deport children. This is a war crime. We know today of 16,200 children that have been deported. Only 300 have returned so far. These criminal actions completely justify the arrest warrants issued by the ICC. In this field, in partnership with the Ukrainians, Prime Minister Morawiecki and I have launched an initiative aiming at bringing back these children that have been abducted by Russia. For that, we will organise a conference. We are at the very beginning of very hard work. We aim to pull together international pressure to take all possible measures to establish the whereabouts of these children. And we aim to assist UN bodies and the relevant international organisations in obtaining better and more complete information on the children who were deported to Russia. This includes also the children who were later adopted or transferred to Russian foster families. I am very thankful to the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, for having offered the support of the United Nations agencies. Because they have of course a significant experience on this very difficult topic.

Of course, we will continue to provide all support we can to Ukraine. Just this week, we have disbursed a new macro-financial assistance tranche worth EUR 1.5 billion. With that, we help keep Ukraine running, while it is defending itself. And we are once again increasing our military equipment support to Ukraine. And in this context, I also welcome the agreement in the Foreign Affairs Council on aiming to provide one million rounds of ammunition to Ukraine within the next 12 months. Of course, to achieve this, we have to massively ramp up production capacity of ammunition in Europe. We have discussed how to move forward on this as quickly as possible. The Commission will come forward with a legal proposal that allows for the ramping-up of industrial production of ammunition. Therefore, the legal proposal is necessary. This includes for example the support from the EU budget. It is about building, expanding and repurposing manufacturing facilities, and to strengthen the entire ammunition supply chain to be fast.

Finally, I would like to stress the great success of the solidarity lanes in enabling Ukraine to export large quantities of grains and other agricultural products. This is besides the Black Sea Grain Initiative, the second big initiative on helping Ukraine to export its grain. In this context, it is important that we are helping – and we discussed that tonight – our farmers in the European Union that have to deal with the market consequences. Because a lot of grain is now coming to the European market, and this has an influence on the prices. And therefore, those front-line countries that are helping the most with the solidarity lanes should not suffer then from disadvantages. As a first step, we have mobilised over EUR 56 million from the Emergency Agricultural Reserve. But this is not enough. This was very clear tonight. Therefore, I am grateful to Romania that did a motion and

that suggested that we will look into increasing this amount for the farmers in the front-line states.

The fourth topic I want to report on is of course the big topic of economic and industrial competitiveness. The global competition is strong. We have taken major steps to maintain our head-start, and this in a very short amount of time. You all know about the Inflation Reduction Act. Through the discussions with our American partners, we have addressed key concerns. As you know, on leased electric vehicles, the United States has now agreed that European carmakers get access to the US market and to tax breaks, like their American counterparts. And on critical raw materials that have been sourced or processed in the European Union, it is also agreed that they will be treated in the same way as those sourced and refined in the United States. We will for that purpose negotiate a specific agreement to cover this.

The third point we have agreed with the United States is a transparency dialogue about the clean-tech subsidies. This is to make sure that our respective schemes on both sides of the Atlantic reinforce each other and do not compete with one another. Of course, to make our own clean-tech industry thrive, we still have to do our homework here in the European Union. And this is what the Green Deal Industrial Plan is all about. You might recall that at our last EUCO meeting, Leaders strongly backed the main pillars and objectives of the Green Deal Industrial Plan. Therefore, last week, the Commission tabled the relevant concrete legal proposals, in particular the Net-Zero Industry Act and the Critical Raw Materials Act. So the proposals are on the table. In line with the Leaders conclusions of today, it is now up to the European Parliament and the Council to find a rapid agreement on our proposals. This is the package, that you are well familiar with, for the clean-tech industry.

Now, of course, competitiveness is much broader and much wider. If we zoom out, we need to act on the overall competitiveness. And there we need to act on many different fronts. We discussed this in depth over many, many hours. I just want, in a telegram style, to highlight a few points very briefly.

First, we must better harness our Single Market, that is also getting rid of the still existing barriers in the Single Market.

Second, you have heard it many times, but it is important: we need to deepen the Capital Markets Union and complete the Banking Union. This is essential to unlock a vast amount needed of private investments.

Third point: Of course, we also need large public investment in infrastructure and in cutting-edge projects. And for that, we need sustainable public finances. This is the whole topic of rules that are fit for this challenge. In other words, the reform of our European economic governance framework.

The fourth point that is important is that we boost our spending on research and development. Innovation is the key to success in the Single Market. You know that we have the aim to invest 3% of the GDP in research and development since more than 20 years. We are still not there; we have reached 2.3%. Our main competitors have much higher investment. So I very much welcome the Swedish Presidency's initiative to discuss an increase of this goal and how we can get faster and better in investment in research and development.

I have already mentioned the fifth point with the view on the clean-tech industry, that is boosting our resource independence, and here with a strong view on the critical raw materials.

The sixth point that we have intensively discussed because it is a huge topic, but there is way too much to report on today, is the topic of skills. Skills are the make it or break it for our Single Market and our economic success. And we have to get better at having more skilled personnel for our Single Market.

Finally, the seventh point is the strengthening of the supply chains with new trade agreements.

Very briefly at the very end: migration. You know that I wrote a letter, as requested by the European Council, right before the European Council, where we have detailed out our activities since the last European Council. There are two tracks: the Pact on Migration and Asylum, this has to go its way through Parliament and Council; and the operational measures. And here the focus was and is on, first of all, working on strengthening the border between Bulgaria and Türkiye; launching two pilot projects on border management, how we deal at the border with migrants arriving, not only in Bulgaria but also in Romania; and to show best practices of border management for fast asylum procedures or return procedures. We are reinforcing the search and rescue capacities of North African partners. This is being complemented by more efforts in the fight against smugglers. We are also working with our Western Balkan partners, here mainly through Frontex that has now deployed border guards in the region. And finally, we are intensifying the cooperation with third countries on returns.

I know it is a huge agenda that I have been reporting on. I am happy to answer your questions.

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