Speech by President von der Leyen at the World Leader for Peace and Security Award

Brussels, 12 December 2020

Dear Governor Dukakis,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is such an honour to be here with you today. At the Michael Dukakis Institute for Leadership and Innovation, you are at the forefront of research and debate. And you definitely work on some of the world's most pressing issues. You drive the discussion on digital policy and how a human-centric approach on AI could look like. This is an issue whose importance simply cannot be overestimated. Today I would like to speak about our European perspective.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am a tech optimist! I believe that science and technology have the power to improve our lives. When I studied to become a medical doctor, I learned that technology saves lives. Artificial intelligence can help identify cancers that used to go undetected. And modern robots can help to perform high-precision surgery that used to be too risky just a few years ago.

But of course, there is another side. Some of us are deeply concerned about the role which will be left for human beings in a world run by AI. Others worry about the serious effects that algorithms can have on the health of our democracies. Who is taking the final decisions? Who is steering the flow of information? Who is deciding on rules?

The world that we see through social media platforms seems real. But it is constructed. A list of search results seems objective. But it is different for each and every one of us. Steered by algorithms. Thousands of likes and retweets create a sense of unity. While we literally live in different worlds.

Yes, algorithms can be a danger to our democracy. But they do not have to be. We have the power to protect ourselves. This is why, next week, the European Commission will present its Digital Services Act to make sure that platforms are transparent about the way algorithms work. And that they take responsibility for their systemic effects. We just cannot leave decisions, which have a huge impact on our democracies, to systems, which are a black box for us. There must be at least transparency on how the algorithm works.

AI can have profound impacts on the life of the individual. AI may influence who to recruit for a certain post or whether to grant a certain pension application. For people to accept a role for AI in such decisions, they must be comprehensible. And they must respect people's legal rights – just like any human decision-maker must. This is why we have to be able to examine the workings of the system and to ensure human oversight. Our aim is to create an AI ecosystem of trust.

This is our European way of dealing with AI: Yes, Europe embraces innovation and entrepreneurship. And yes, we are eager to explore the full potential of AI for our industry and services. But we will never lose sight of those who are meant to benefit from these technological wonders – our citizens. What sets Europe apart from competitors like China is not the size of our tech sector or how attractive we are for venture capital. What sets Europe apart from competitors is the fact that our values come first. Human beings come first.

Dear Governor Dukakis,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am so honoured to receive this award today. For me this is also a very personal starting point for a great new beginning between the U.S. and Europe. A partnership that has been tested time and again. A partnership that today is needed more than ever, not at least in the digital world. The way we approach algorithms and AI will define the world we live in.

This is why the EU proposes to start work on a Transatlantic AI Agreement. We want to set a
blueprint for regional and global standards aligned with our values: Human rights, and pluralism, inclusion and the protection of privacy. A transatlantic dialogue on the responsibility of online platforms!

Together, we could set the blueprint for other democracies facing the same challenges. To make sure that algorithms and AI are a force for good. Once again: I am delighted to be with you today!

Thank you!