



Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the inauguration of the new President of the United States and the current political situation

Brussels, 20 January 2021

President Sassoli! Président Michel! Honourable Members!

In all beginning there dwells a magic force. Jedem Anfang wohnt ein Zauber inne. I cannot help but think of this famous line of the poet Hermann Hesse when looking forward to the inauguration of Joe Biden in a few hours from now. Joe Biden's oath will be a message of healing for a deeply divided nation. And it will be a message of hope for a world that is waiting for the U.S. to be back in the circle of like-minded states. This time-honoured ceremony on the steps of the U.S. Capitol will be a demonstration of the resilience of American democracy. And a resounding proof that, once again, after four long years, Europe has a friend in the White House. And he will be standing next to Kamala Harris, the first woman to be Vice-President of the United States.

This is a historic achievement and this also makes this day very special. This new dawn in America is the moment we have been waiting for, so long. Europe is ready for a new start with our oldest and most trusted partner. And this is why the Commission recently has adopted a new, forward looking transatlantic agenda. And it focuses on where we can together join forces to push for global change – based on our common values, interests and global influence.

From climate change to health, from digitalisation to democracy – these are global challenges that need renewed and improved global cooperation. And the European Union and the United States must lead from the front and bring an alliance of like-minded partners with us. There is of course no greater need for global cooperation in the short term than in tackling the pandemic, which has been so devastating on both sides of the Atlantic. As you know, the European Union has been leading the global response since day one.

And it was so encouraging that so many U.S. organisations and foundations have helped build and design the COVAX Facility, our global alliance to bring vaccines to the low- and middle-income countries. Now I am looking forward that the U.S. government will join our common effort. This will be a strong message. And beyond this, we will propose to the United States to step up our work on health prevention, preparedness and response – at the G20 Health Summit in Rome in May.

And I am delighted that on day one – as they announced – of the new American administration, the United States will rejoin the Paris Agreement. This will be a very strong starting point for our renewed cooperation. And of course, way more is to come. We want to deepen our partnership on emissions trading and carbon pricing. We want to join forces with the United States to fight the loss of biodiversity and the destruction of nature. We want to develop the technologies that will drive us to climate neutrality. It is with this new green tech alliance that we will look forward at everything: From offshore to climate change; from hydrogen that is clean to sustainable batteries and to circular economies that we have to build up to fight this climate change. We will be ready to engage from day one on.

Honourable Members,

The relief that many of us are feeling about the change of administration in Washington should not blind us to the fact that, although Donald Trump's presidency may be history in just a few hours, his movement will not. More than 70 million Americans voted for him in the election. Just a few days ago, several hundred of them stormed the Capitol in Washington, the heart of American democracy.

The television images of that event shocked us all. That is what happens when words incite action. That is what happens when hate speech and fake news spread like wildfire through digital media. They become a danger to democracy. We should take these images from the USA as a sobering warning. Despite our deep-rooted confidence in our European democracy, we are not immune to similar events.

On the contrary – Europe is all too familiar with them. Last August, several hundred right-wing

extremists tried to storm the Reichstag building in Berlin. It is only thanks to the courage and vigilance of a handful of police officers that they were not successful. And we remember Jo Cox, the British Labour Member of Parliament who was murdered by a right-wing extremist in June 2016, during the torrid days leading up to the Brexit referendum. A deed which still makes us shudder today. Of course, the storming of the Capitol was different. But in Europe, too, there are people who feel disadvantaged, who are very angry.

There are people who subscribe to rampant conspiracy theories, which are often a confused mixture of completely abstruse fantasies. And, of course, we too see this hate and contempt for our democracy spreading unfiltered through social media to millions of people.

Honourable Members,

Of course, we must seek to address the concerns and problems of each and every one of our citizens, such as the – entirely justified – fear of being left behind economically in the pandemic. And we will do this, for example through the NextGenerationEU investment and reconstruction programme, with its budget of billions of euros.

Ultimately, however, we may not succeed in convincing everyone that there are no dark forces seeking to undermine our democracies. But there is one thing that we politicians can, and must, do: We must make sure that these messages of hate and fake news can no longer be spread unchecked. We must impose democratic limits on the untrammelled and uncontrolled political power of the internet giants.

Since, in a world in which polarising opinions are most likely to be heard, it is a short step from perverse conspiracy theories to the death of police officers. Unfortunately, the storming of Capitol Hill showed us just how true that is.

Let me first of all make one thing clear so that we avoid misunderstandings in our debate. In Europe, we value innovation. We are excited about the opportunities offered by the latest technology. And we are open to new things. For without new things, without innovation, without technological progress, there will be no tomorrow and we will lose the things that matter to us. However, new technologies must never mean that others decide how we live our lives. And that is exactly what I am talking about here.

As you know, the Commission launched the Digital Services Act and the Digital Market Act in December. Put simply, we want to ensure that, in future, if something is illegal offline it must also be illegal online. We want the platforms to be transparent about how their algorithms work. We cannot accept a situation where decisions that have a wide-ranging impact on our democracy are being made by computer programs without any human supervision.

And we want it laid down clearly that internet companies take responsibility for the content they disseminate. This point is also important to me: No matter how right it may have been for Twitter to switch off Donald Trump's account five minutes after midnight, such serious interference with freedom of expression should be based on laws and not on company rules. It should be based on decisions of parliaments and politicians and not of Silicon Valley managers.

Honourable Members,

It is in this digital field that Europe has so much to offer the new government in Washington. The path we have taken in Europe can be an example for approaches at international level. As has long been the case with the General Data Protection Regulation. I can imagine, for example, a joint Trade and Technology Council, as a first step. Together we could create a digital economy rulebook that is valid worldwide: From data protection and privacy to the security of critical infrastructure. A body of rules based on our values: human rights and pluralism, inclusion and protection of privacy.

Honourable Members,

This day brings good news: The United States are back. And Europe stands ready. To reconnect with an old and trusted partner, to breathe new life in our cherished alliance.

Thank you!

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