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Speech at the European Council, 14 December 2023

Good morning everyone,

The 23rd of June 2022 marked an important milestone for our European project. The day that this Council came to a historic agreement to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, and to give a clear European perspective to Georgia.

In the past year and a half, Ukraine has advanced quickly in meeting all of its objectives by adopting the necessary legislation and reforms, even in the most difficult of conditions.

The same is true for Moldova.

Dear colleagues,

We find ourselves at the threshold of another historic moment for our Union. And it is on us to decide whether a historic opportunity is grabbed or whether it will go down as a historic failure. The distance between the two is very often extremely narrow.

The time is now to live up to our promise. To show unity and solidarity. To show courage and resolve. To show that this can be a win-win situation for all.

Opening EU accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova is the next step.

I understand that this is a momentous decision, I understand that this is not easy for some around this table, I respect that. But it is not a decision borne out of political expediency. It is a decision based on merit, on respect for our criteria, on each nation having its own path towards the objective goals we set for them.

The global geo-political situation means that there is also a price of inaction.

As I said yesterday in the EU-Western Balkans summit, a window of opportunity has opened for all of us. We should not slam it shut.

Let me say that when it comes to preparing our neighbours for accession, we stand ready to do our part. The European Parliament and the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine already have strong relations. Just recently we signed a renewed Memorandum of Understanding for parliamentary democracy support between our two Parliaments. It is a practical way in which we as the European Parliament can help Ukraine prepare for future EU accession.

The same goes for Moldova. Our democracy support programs and close partnership with the Moldovan Parliament are already proving valuable for Moldova's European path.

Enlargement is our strongest geopolitical, strategic and future-oriented investment. Its transformative ability is something we all know well. A merit-based enlargement strengthens our continent, our Union and our way of life.

In the Western Balkans we have to be careful not to dilute ambitions or motivation on both sides. We have all seen the worrying decline of pro-European sentiments in the region, even amongst young people. Hope must be transformed into tangible results or it will evaporate.

Every candidate country will need to follow their own - merit-based - path to membership. It will not be easy and as many of us here can remember and attest to, it will also take some time. But while they are reforming and changing, we have to be ready to do the same. That means continuing the discussions about what the future of the European Union should look like - starting with Romania and Bulgaria's place in the Schengen area.

Going forward, the European Parliament's contribution on reforms, which is detailed in our treaty change report, provides a good basis for this reflection and my hope is that it will be discussed at a future meeting.

In the meantime, the war in Ukraine continues. We need to remain steadfast in our political, military, humanitarian and financial support, even as it becomes more difficult. As much as it is a moral obligation, it is a strategic one too. It is also strategic that we come to an agreement on the new 50 billion Ukraine Facility that the European Parliament voted on in October. Because this is about investments and growth. For Ukraine and for Europe.

The Ukraine facility will assist Ukraine's recovery, reconstruction and modernisation which will mean less budgetary support for the future.

Our aim to become stronger, more united and more competitive in an increasingly changing and hostile world needs to be backed up by sufficient resources. And to many it still seems like we are simply putting off the inevitable need to make tough financial choices.

The pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine, climate change, energy and the cost of living crises, have all had their impact. Rising interest rates have caused our NextGenerationEU borrowing expenses to rise. Our MFF is stretched to its limit, with the new tasks we have agreed together. This European Council therefore needs to reach an agreement: One that respects the prerogatives of the European Parliament as budgetary authority as laid down in the Treaties. One that finds a structural solution for managing the borrowing costs - and progress on own resources are part of this solution. One that preserves the Union's shared values and will not compromise on the rule of law. One that ensures the EU can respond effectively to crises and unforeseen circumstances. And one that does not further cut into flagship programmes that for many are the tangible face of the European Union.

That is why the European Parliament has repeated calls for a revision of the MFF and why we are ready to take this discussion forward.

Just like we found agreement on the world's first Artificial Intelligence Act and the Critical Raw Materials Act that the Parliament voted on two days ago. How, together, we are successfully boosting our energy independence and providing incentives for clean energy. How we adopted legislation on gas storage and on gas demand reduction and how we are at the finishing line to reform our electricity markets. How we are world leaders in progressive market-based climate policies.

We have achieved things that seemed impossible. We can do so again.

The same is true for our engagement in the Middle East - where we need to do more to address the humanitarian situation in Gaza, and the aftermath of the October 7th terror attack in Israel and in the wider Middle East. The European Union can take a leading role in plotting a way forward, in planning for the day after, in helping in reconstruction, in nation building and looking towards real, sustainable, lasting stability based on a two-State solution. Even in the fog of war we need to talk about peace, about how to save innocent lives, stop terror, and respect international law - and about how we can offer respite to Palestinians and hope to Israelis - today. We also need to ensure that the West Bank does not become a new regional flashpoint.

Finally, allow me one last appeal on the Migration and Asylum pact. We are closer than we have been in a decade. I am hopeful. We need to seize the momentum. An agreement on this package before the end of the year will mean a decisive victory for the constructive pro-European centre ahead of the start of a European elections year. We can show that Europe has the solutions for the issues that our citizens care about.

Dear colleagues,

The responsibility is on our shoulders to take the right decisions. Even if they're difficult. To push through. To find compromise. That is, after all, why we are in politics. To win the battles that seem impossible... until, of course, they are won. We have a whole bag of experience and legislative work that we have already accomplished.

Europe has shown that we can lead, that we can take the necessary decisions and today we can lead again.