

Speech by President Charles Michel after his meeting with the Federal Chancellor of Austria Sebastian Kurz

Grüß Gott Sebastian,

I would like to start by thanking you for the invitation to spend this evening with you. We had a very extensive meeting covering the various European issues that most concern us.

I should like to take my turn in congratulating you on the good election result and the subsequent negotiation leading to the government agreement. That agreement expresses Austria's commitment to play an active role in supporting the European project. I'm delighted about that, as we have already enjoyed good cooperation when we were both prime ministers. We know each other and know we'll be able to work together to make progress on a number of priority issues that mean a lot to us.

Firstly, I share your ambition to work on growing the economy and creating more jobs and more economic activity. That's a precondition for making progress, too, on social conditions and policies. I believe that Europe has a role to play, by developing our digital agenda and promoting innovation, tomorrow's jobs, artificial intelligence and big data. These are ways in which Europe can bring more added value in the future.

Climate change, which you mentioned, is in my view another structural component on which to build a European growth plan centred on innovation and technology. That strong ambition was expressed by the December European Council, when Ursula von der Leyen announced the European Green Deal. This will be a key focus for the years ahead, as this ambition to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent is a very clear message addressed to universities, businesses, researchers and SMEs. It will be up to the European authorities to set the course and be consistent in trying to provide Europe with the resources it needs.

That will also be necessary in the discussions on the next EU budget. The Just Transition Fund is a key component, as it will indicate how we can realistically use the funds available to adapt our infrastructure and prepare for the future we want with regard to climate change.

We face many challenges at the European level, which we will come back to shortly.

Brexit is undoubtedly an important topic. We respect the choice that British voters made in the referendum, although we regret it. The withdrawal agreement has now been endorsed and we are entering the second stage of negotiations. It is very important to maintain the unity we have between the 27 EU countries, in the hope that we can keep a close relationship with the

United Kingdom in various areas, including the economy, trade, security, and geopolitical matters.

Then there's a final matter I would like to mention at this stage: our shared ambition, which we'll need to bolster so that the European Union can exert at international level a degree of political and diplomatic influence that is more in keeping with its economic and political weight. We are talking about 500 million citizens, in democracies and under the rule of law, with strong, universal values of dignity. We have values to promote at international level. We also have interests to defend at international level, in our relations with the other major world regions.

It is vital that we become a bigger player on the international stage and don't allow others to decide for us the destiny of the European Union. That seems to me to be the central concern, specifically in order to prevent the difficult situations we have known in the past, with Europe faced at times with major migration inflows, sometimes even of irregular or illegal migration. This is one aspect of our ability to attempt to tackle a number of challenges, and to do so in a spirit of European cohesion and unity. Migration will be the subject of one of the discussions we'll be holding in the European Council in the months ahead.

To sum up, I would like to thank the chancellor again for welcoming me here. I'm glad to have this chance to deepen our dialogue, because it is very important to me personally and as President of the European Council to clearly understand the political priorities of the different governments in Europe. I believe this clear understanding is key to the trust we share. Having the trust of a European leader is very important to me, because I know that our mutual trust, the proper understanding of different priorities, is the indispensable first step towards reaching decisions together.

In recent years we've seen the European Union facing frequent crises – a financial crisis, a fiscal crisis, a migration crisis and Brexit. But I am entirely convinced that this new institutional cycle, with a new European Commission, a new European Parliament and a new European Council, needs to be the starting point for a more positive European Union agenda. We, as European leaders, need to decide to take greater control of our destiny, to identify the priorities on which decisions must be taken in the interest of the peoples of Europe while respecting the different sensibilities in different European countries.

Thank you for this opportunity to meet. Thank you in advance for the work which – I am quite sure – we will do together over the coming years. Thank you very much.