



Special Address by President von der Leyen at the Davos Agenda Week*

Brussels, 26 January 2021

Thank you very much, dear Klaus,

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, for inviting me again,

And indeed, it is worth looking back. When I was with you in Davos a year ago, Donald Trump's visit was at the centre of attention. And we were worried about the stability of our global alliances. And climate activist Greta Thunberg was also on top of a guest list full of stars. And indeed, my speech focused on the European Green Deal and of course Digitalisation. But at that time, other news very quietly were coming to us from China and they were barely noticed by most of us. Few suspected at the time that this would be the start of a pandemic that a year later would still hold us in its grip.

And yet, there were signs in Davos last January. Richard Hatchett, for example, the former White House pandemic advisor, he was a lone voice when he said: 'This is not a Chinese problem. This is a problem for the whole world.' And he was to be proven right.

And a year ago, my bilateral talks revolved primarily around the question: Would, for example, the U.S. government impose punitive tariffs on European carmakers? Today, a year later, we are worrying about whether democracy itself might have been permanently damaged in the last four years. And images, like we saw a few weeks ago when an angry mob stormed the Capitol, were beyond my imagination.

And yet, the dangers that social media poses to our democracy were also already discussed in Davos. I remember sitting in a basement restaurant of my hotel with, among others, the business journalist Rana Foroohar and the former Google developer Tristan Harris. And you might have seen some of them in the documentary 'The Social Dilemma' – I can only recommend it.

At that time, the activists warned about the business models of big tech companies and the consequences for our democracy. And they described how the economic laws of social media are eating away at the fabric of our society. And how fake news, driven by algorithms, spread six times faster than real news. They pinned their hopes on Europe. Because the European Union had already proven that it is able to set standards that are respected around the world, such as with our General Data Protection Regulation – the GDPR. So the warning signs were already there in Davos.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is no better place than the World Economic Forum to find out about the major trends in our society. To be updated on what is keeping up at night entrepreneurs and philanthropists, or managers and the NGO community. To see how policymakers look at the future. But sometimes you just have to listen carefully.

And this year, the World Economic Forum is once again asking the right questions with your initiative, Klaus, 'The Great Reset'. We must learn from this crisis. We have to change the way we live and do business, to be able to keep what we value and hold dear. If temperatures keep rising and nature keeps disappearing, we will see more natural disasters and zoonotic diseases.

We have spoken a lot about the links between biodiversity loss and COVID-19. Now we must move to action. To understand why, I want you to accompany me to a remote village in Guinea, just for a minute. There, a young boy playing next to a tree some years ago, is thought to have been the first victim of one of the worst outbreaks of Ebola. A hollow tree had been infested by bats. The animals had been pushed towards the village, because 80% of forests in the region had been destroyed.

We do not know exactly what happened there. But what we do know is that the boy became gravely ill and died a little later, as did his sister and his pregnant mother. And we do know just how tragic the repercussions were across Africa and the world. And if we do not urgently act to protect our nature, the next pandemic will be around the corner.

And to those who prefer the business case. Here it is: More than half of global GDP is dependent on high-functioning biodiversity and ecosystems – and it is from food to tourism, you just name it. And

in the latest World Economic Forum Global Risk Report, the top five global risks are all related to the environment. Almost three quarters of the Earth's surface have been altered and we see the changes in our everyday lives: Less wilderness and wildlife, increasing temperatures and extreme weather. And these developments are different sides of the same coin.

In fact, they mutually reinforce each other. When we lose forests, we do not 'just' lose green space or natural habitat. We lose a key ally in our fight against climate change. And this is why Europe will soon present a legal framework for the restoration of healthy ecosystems. It is why we will protect at least 30% of land and sea here in Europe. We are ready to broker the same ambition at global level, at the next UN Biodiversity Summit in Kunming. This will have to be like COP21 was for climate. Because we need a Paris-style agreement for biodiversity.

Dear friends,

This is one of the priorities of the European Green Deal I presented to you indeed in Davos last year. One year on, this has not lost any of its urgency. Europe has set out to become the first continent to reach climate neutrality by 2050. And we have seen the momentum that this has generated. From South Korea to Japan, from South Africa to China – economic powerhouses around the world now share our ambition. And I must say, I am delighted that the U.S. has now re-joined the Paris Agreement, in one of President Biden's first acts in office.

And we have also stepped up our own ambition and action. The first ever European Climate Law will hopefully soon come into force. We have agreed a greenhouse gas emission reduction target of at least 55% by 2030. We will put forward legislation to help us get there from renewables to emissions trading, from clean hydrogen to the circular economy. And we have dedicated 37% of NextGenerationEU – that is our EUR 750 billion Recovery Plan –, 37% dedicated to the European Green Deal.

But public funding alone will not be enough. We all have a responsibility – and we must all do our fair share. And this is why I strongly support a growing culture of sustainable corporate governance. Companies, who get ahead of the game now, will have a big advantage. We have seen that nature destruction can have the same impact for a company as major oil spills while, for example, fashion companies who use recycled material already have an additional selling point for their environmentally conscious customers.

This is why we will propose to strengthen due diligence for companies. And we will put forward legislation to ensure that the EU market does not drive deforestation on the other side of the world. We know how important this is for investors, who are looking for truly sustainable projects. Our European Union green bond standard, for example, and taxonomy will lead the way. It will bring clarity on what accounts for sustainable, eco-friendly activities. We all benefit from nature and we all benefit from the protection it gives us. So I think we all have to play our role in this game.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A year ago at Davos, we talked also intensively about digitalisation. The pandemic has massively accelerated the process. The European Union will dedicate 20% of NextGenerationEU to digital projects. To nurture innovative ecosystems, for example where universities, companies, innovators can access data and cooperate. To boost the vibrant start-up scene we have in cities like Sofia and Lisbon and to become a global hub for Artificial Intelligence. So that the 2020s can finally be Europe's Digital Decade.

But for this to be a success, we must also address the darker sides of the digital world. Like for so many of us, the storming of the Capitol came as a shock to me. We are always quick to say: Democracy and values, they are part of our DNA. And that is true. But we must nurture our democracy every day, and defend our institutions against the corrosive power of hate speech, of disinformation, fake news and incitement to violence. In a world where polarising opinions are the loudest, it is a short step from crude conspiracy theories to the death of a police officer. Unfortunately, the storming of the Capitol Hill showed us how just true that is.

The business model of online platforms has an impact – and not only on free and fair competition, but also on our democracies, our security and on the quality of our information. That is why we need to contain this immense power of the big digital companies. Because we want the values we cherish in the offline world also to be respected online. At its most basic, this means that what is illegal offline should be illegal online too. And we want the platforms to be transparent about how their algorithms work. Because we cannot accept that decisions, that have a far-reaching impact on our democracy, are taken by computer programmes alone.

We want it clearly laid down that internet companies take responsibility for the manner in which they disseminate, promote and remove content. No matter how tempting it may have been for Twitter to

switch off President Trump's account, such serious interference with freedom of expression should not be based on company rules alone. There needs to be a framework of laws for such far-reaching decisions. This is why the Commission launched the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act in December. This is our new rulebook for our digital market.

I want to invite our friends in the United States to join our initiatives. Together, we could create a digital economy rulebook that is valid worldwide: It goes 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 the protection of privacy. So Europe stands ready.

The challenges to our democracy, the pandemic, climate change – in his inauguration speech President Joe Biden so aptly spoke of a Cascade of Crises. And indeed, we face an outstanding set of challenges. But we can meet them – if we work together. That is what we all have to learn again after four long years. That it is not a sign of weakness, to reach out and help each other, but a signal of strength.

This spirit of cooperation is the only mind-set which can help us tackle our challenges. The pandemic has shown the limitations of some of our old ways of working. But it has also created new ones, in record time. So take the vaccine that will hopefully protect us all from COVID-19. What normally takes five to ten years, to develop a vaccine, was achieved in ten months. Because the world pooled its resources, scientists shared their expertise and different manufacturers worked together.

The European Union and others helped with money – large sums were invested – to build research capacities and production facilities early. Europe invested billions to help develop the world's first COVID-19 vaccines. To create a truly global common good. And now, the companies must deliver. They must honour their obligations. This is why we will set up a vaccine export transparency mechanism. Europe is determined to contribute to this global common good. But it also means business.

This is also why early in the pandemic, the European Union, together with organisations like the World Economic Forum, or the Gates Foundation and Global Citizen organised pledging initiatives to mobilise funding for the global coronavirus response. In the COVAX vaccination alliance, the European Union, together with 186 countries, will be securing millions of doses of vaccines for low-income countries. The point is that it is only by working together – across borders and across sectors – that we can tackle our global challenges. No private company or public authority can do it alone.

This is why I believe this new form of blended partnerships should prepare and protect us against the next big risk. This is a blueprint for cooperation in today's world. We need to bring together the innovation and the capability of the private sector, and the long-term vision and predictability and the funding of the public sector. It is in this spirit that Europe will propose to create a bio-defence preparedness programme. This will be a public-private partnership – and it will sit within our new European Health Emergency Response Authority, or in short HERA.

This new programme, it will be proactive. We cannot wait for the next pandemic to start preparing. So this new programme will be permanent. And it will be fully dedicated to discovering and preparing for known and emerging pathogens, and then developing and manufacturing vaccines at scale to respond to them. Second, it would secure long-term and predictable funding for this task, rather than reallocating resources every time. And third, it would bring together cutting-edge tech-companies, blue-chip manufacturers, as well as regulators such as the European Medicines Agency or the European Commission.

We know that preparedness is everything. And we know that in a pandemic there is no time to lose. We need this new public-private approach to detect earlier, develop together and manufacture faster at scale. This is not just true for pandemics or health. It is true for all major societal challenges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From the protection of our democracy to the protection of our nature: Europe has everything to win from this new form of international and sectoral cooperation. And we will reach out to our partners from around the world – from foundations to global institutions, from CEOs to NGOs, and from our oldest partners across the Atlantic to all those who want to join.

New alliances for new solutions. This is what we will work for – and I know I can count on you and the World Economic Forum to help us build it. I hope to be able to continue this discussion with you soon! For example, Klaus, when we meet hopefully in person, at the special annual meeting in Singapore in May.

And I thank you very much for your attention!

*Updated on 26-01-2021, at 13:00

Related media

[LIVE The Davos Agenda 2021](#)[Participation of Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, at the Davos Agenda Week](#)