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Speech by President von der Leyen at the dinner hosted by Leo Varadkar, Taoiseach of Ireland

Dublin, 15 January 2020

Dear Taoiseach,

Members of the Government, Attorney General,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps, former Taoiseach, Ministers of State,

Dear Friends,

Next year you will celebrate 100 years of Irish independence. And I had the pleasure to have the Taoiseach showing me in the other room the declaration of the revolution that was before independence. And it was impressive to see that, more than 100 years ago, already were enshrined in this document values that are so dear to our heart today here in the European Union, for example citizens' rights or freedoms, the right to vote for women and men. And it is very impressive to be in this old castle and to feel the atmosphere that is typical for the history that breathes through these walls.

It is also amazing for me to be here because it is not only the history of Ireland. But today, as you have said Taoiseach, Ireland is a strong and confident country, with immense potential. You have the fastest growing economy in the European Union. The number of people at work here has never been higher, thousands of new jobs have been created every month. And all this in spite of the spectre of Brexit.

It is first and foremost thanks to the Irish people's tenacious spirit. But it is also because of Ireland's strong European choice. We thank you for that. It is because of Ireland's place at the core of the European Union. In no other country are the benefits of the European membership so self-evident. Let me quote the first European Commissioner from Ireland, the late President Patrick Hillery. He once explained what Ireland would gain from joining the European Union back in 1973. He said: 'Full employment, the end to involuntary emigration, and a standard of living comparable to that of the other nations of Western Europe.'

This was less than 50 years ago, but it feels like ages. Ireland is a different country today – peaceful, prosperous, confident about the future. Your success is partly linked to European funds and the power of the Single Market. But the European Union has been much more to Ireland. Your membership of the European Union paved the way to the Good Friday Agreement – through years of diplomacy, increased trust with the United Kingdom, and the removal of customs posts from the border. And when Brexit put the Good Friday Agreement under threat, the European Union stood firmly on the side of peace.

The United Kingdom has committed to a Protocol that makes sure that a hard border will never ever come back again, neither physically, nor mentally. We now expect the Withdrawal Protocol to be implemented in full and we will invest in ensuring that. We will not let anyone turn the clock back to those dark days – you have my word. And for that I am very happy to note the recent agreement on restoring of power sharing government in Northern Ireland.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we hear sometimes that the European Union takes national sovereignty away from Member States. The opposite is the case. And this is a good example here: the three years since the Brexit referendum demonstrate that. Ireland's national sovereignty has been not only defended but magnified by the European Union. We have shown that, for us, for Europeans, all Member States are equal. And we care for one another.

Our Member States stand together when the vital interests of one are threatened. And we have somehow confirmed the old Irish saying: '*Ní neart go cuir le chéile.*' It says 'no strength without unity' you have understood it hopefully – but I know for sure that, Taoiseach, your German is way better than my Irish. You have also shown that the Irish people see solidarity as a two-way street. When other European countries had to face the refugee crisis, you opened your door to many of them. You showed that hospitality is sacred for the Irish – also for refugees and migrants.

Dear friends,

This green island has been central to European culture for thousands of years. From Irish monks to Samuel Beckett, from James Joyce to the Cranberries, we have always been part of the same family. Yet Ireland and the rest of Europe have never been closer than today. Our mutual solidarity is here to stay. It will remain as strong as the walls of Dublin Castle, particularly as we enter a new phase in the Brexit negotiations.

Last week I was in London to meet Prime Minister Boris Johnson. I have made clear that we want the closest possible relations with the UK – our British friends. It is the story about old friends and new beginnings. Our goal is zero tariffs and zero quotas on our mutual trade. But the precondition for this is fair competition. We are open to keeping the United Kingdom as close as possible to us. But we also know that even with the best possible future agreement, this is not going to be business as usual. There is a difference between being a Member State and not being a Member State. The United Kingdom decided to take a different path and to go further away from us. It is their choice. And we respect it.

But the truth is that our partnership cannot and will not be as close as before – because with every choice comes a consequence. With every decision comes a trade-off. We all know that the negotiations will not be easy. But I am very confident that Phil Hogan and Michel Barnier will do an outstanding job – good that we can count on them! And I am convinced that the European Union and Ireland will continue to thrive.

And we are already seeing it: Big companies – from the tech sector to finance – are moving to Ireland because they are attracted by the Single Market. Your potential is great: as a bridge towards America, through your start-ups, but also as an economy that is capable of adapting to new conditions.

Just think of the climate change. Your government has announced an ambitious Climate Action Plan aiming at climate neutrality by 2050. This is fully in line with the European objective. And we have to act! Today the World Economic Forum published its Global Risks Report, which identified the top five global risks for the economy all as climate-related. But the greatest risk that we face is the risk of non-action. And we got an impression already: You all know the droughts, the fires, the flooding and the extreme weather situations. But it is not only about risks, it is also about opportunities. And that is what the European Green Deal is about. An opportunity for example for farmers of quality products with the ever-growing market of quality food. An opportunity for firms that are re-discovering the recycling business and will create new products, new markets.

Last month, 44 of Europe's largest investors, representing EUR 6 trillion of assets, called on the European Union to adopt as quickly as possible a climate law for climate neutrality in 2050. They want that law! And why? They say it will give them the confidence to make long-term decisions for modern investments. So it is about accountability, sustainability and reliability. The European Green Deal is our new growth strategy. The novelty and the difference is that we will and can foster a growth model that is not consuming, is not extracting resources – but one that gives back more to the planet than it takes away from it.

For this transition to work, it also has to be just for people. Nobody should be left behind. Yesterday the Commission presented its investment plan for the European Green Deal, including a Just Transition Mechanism. It will provide support to the most exposed regions, such as for example the Irish Midlands. That is exactly where Europe makes the difference. None of us will be able to tackle the climate change on our own. But together, we can really make a change. We can really be a frontrunner. And when we do have the technologies, we have the innovative procedures, we have CO₂-free production lines, then we will be the exporter of innovation and knowledge to the rest of the world when they align.

Our economies are transforming, not only because of the need to protect our planet. This is vital, yes. But also because of new technologies. And this island is home to a growing local tech sector, entirely made in Ireland. Your start-ups are phenomenal; they are using artificial intelligence to help children for example to learn to read. They are working with hospitals to monitor the cybersecurity of medical equipment. Investing in these Irish technologies is not just about jobs and local development. It is also a matter of technological sovereignty of Ireland and of Europe, building on our own capacities.

Of course, we want to continue attracting investments from foreign players. But we also want European players to grow and to compete with foreign giants. And actually, when it comes to cybersecurity, we want to be fully sovereign. This requires strategic digital infrastructure and technologies. In the next years, my Commission will work to invest in our digital sovereignty and I am glad to know you at my side. We will foster European digital players with solid roots within our research communities, our economies and our societies.

Dear friends,

Now more than ever, Europe needs Ireland. We need your entrepreneurship, we need your resilience, we need your free spirit you are so famous for. And now more than ever, Ireland stands to gain from being part of our common European family. As Leo, you sometimes say: 'Europe brought Ireland to the centre of the world.' And Ireland is now at the heart of our common European home, that you helped to build. This reciprocity is so beautiful.

It is now up to us, and to the young generation, to craft the future of our common home. After the great crisis and a long recovery, this can be a decade of progress and of transformation for Europe. Ireland in the 20s will continue to be the green heart of our precious Union.

And in this good sense: Long live Europe!

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