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Opening remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Costa and Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán following the meeting of the European Council of 19 December 2024

Thank you very much, António.

And congratulations on hosting your very first European Council. We had excellent discussions, focusing first of all, as you said, on Ukraine. We know that 2025 is going to be a decisive year. It will be three years since the start of Russia's invasion. Putin is redoubling efforts to make gains. So bolstering Ukraine right now is both a moral and strategic imperative for us. The world is watching how we sustain our support to Ukraine. And just like the brave Ukrainian resistance, we will be steadfast. So, we need to make sure that Ukraine prevails. And as you said, we have to put Ukraine in a position of strength. Looking back, Europe has so far provided Ukraine with almost EUR 130 billion. We have secured economic and financial stability until the end of 2025. That is good news. And with the Ukraine Facility and our G7 loan, we are even covering most of Ukraine's financing gap for 2025. This is a major achievement. And it will also allow Ukraine to have more fiscal space to purchase the much-needed military equipment. One of the most immediate challenges is the energy system. Russia is systematically targeting it. We are constantly repairing it. But there is still a capacity gap. We must further improve interconnectivity with the European Union's grid. We also need to collectively do more on repairs and on decentralising the electricity generation. For us the goal is that in these darkest days of the year, we must keep the lights on in Ukraine. In parallel, we continue to accompany Ukraine on its path of accession to our Union. If Ukraine keeps up the good work, we should be ready to open the first cluster of accession negotiations early next year. Some others could follow during that year as well.

Then, as you said António, we discussed the Middle East and the situation in Syria. With the fall of Assad, for the very first time in a decade, the people of Syria can hope for a better future. But we all know that for now the jury is still out. It is too early to say whether the new leadership will be able to deliver what they promise; whether the territorial integrity and national unity will be preserved; and whether minorities will be protected. Europe will do its part to support Syria at this critical juncture. Because we care about Syria's future. Europe cares about the power going back to the people of Syria. Europe has a

role to play. Therefore, first of all, we engage with our regional partners as you have described, António. The situation in Syria can have important implications for them. This week I was in Jordan to meet King Abdullah, following the Aqaba meeting in Amman. And I was also in Türkiye for discussions with President Erdoğan. Then, it is important for us to intensify the contacts on the ground to continue addressing the humanitarian needs of the people in Syria. We have established channels for political talks with HTS, this is building on the existing channels that we have through our humanitarian aid. We have had these channels all this time while respecting the principle of no contact, no cooperation, no funding of Assad's regime, but now it pays out to be on the ground and to have the first political channel with HTS and other factions. It is good that our top diplomat has now returned to Damascus. Then we have to look at future steps. We are already Syria's biggest donor. We are now stepping up our support. We have launched a humanitarian air bridge for delivery of aid via Türkiye and Jordan. We have topped our humanitarian aid to more than EUR 160 million for this year alone. But we are fully aware that more is needed. As you know, we have had the annual Syria conferences. They can be a powerful catalyser for this. Thanks to these conferences, we have mobilised in the past more than EUR 33 billion. And now we are looking via this channel to continue to support the people in Syria, with a focus on early recovery and reconstruction. But in the same vein, I must say that these efforts will have to be matched by real deeds by the new leadership in Damascus. So it is a step-for-step approach that we are choosing here. We also discussed the issue of Syrians returning home. The situation on the ground remains very volatile. We are working very closely with UNHCR. It is good that the UNHCR has access in the whole country of Syria. One thing is very clear: With the support of the UNHCR, all returns must be voluntary, safe and dignified.

Let me move to my third and final point. We had indeed good discussions about our relationships with the United States and the rest of the world. We agreed that our priority must be to preserve a strong transatlantic relationship. We will proactively engage on a positive agenda with the President-elect – this especially as we are significant trading partners and share deeply integrated markets and supply chains. We have a joint interest in addressing global economic challenges such as Chinese overcapacity. At the same time, we are preparing ourselves for various scenarios. Moreover, we have a strong security partnership and share a long-standing commitment to transatlantic peace and stability.

Finally, Viktor, a word on the Hungarian Presidency as it draws to a close. Your Presidency came during the transition between two political cycles. So it is always a challenge. Still, I count many achievements during this term. You advanced our support to Ukraine with the adoption of the 15th sanctions package and the agreement on the G7 loan framework. I also want to highlight the ambitious Budapest Declaration. We all signed off on one goal, which is a competitive Europe. The declaration outlines the homework we must do so that Europe remains a prime destination for business. So a lot of work ahead of us in

the new term. Your work also delivered a historic decision for Romania and Bulgaria. As of January 1, 2025, internal land border controls will be lifted. They will be fully integrated into the Schengen area, and that is where they belong. This was a major step forward in deepening Europe internally. But your Presidency also expanded Europe externally. This week, you reached milestones on the accession paths of Montenegro, Albania and Serbia. And finally, you organised a very successful European Political Community Summit in early November. These are important achievements. So thank you for your efforts during the Presidency.

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