

Benelux Prime Ministers' Summit

Bourglinster Castle, 28 November 2022

Joint Declaration

We, as Prime Ministers of the three Benelux countries, gather here today to reiterate our attachment to deepened Benelux cooperation and further European integration. Just as at our beginnings, 78 years ago, there could not be a better time for such a commitment.

We are in a time of crisis. As war has returned to our continent, our core European values of democracy, human dignity and freedom have come into focus. We, the countries of the Benelux, will stand firm and promote European unity and solidarity.

Whilst NATO remains the cornerstone of our collective defence, we are convinced that a strong and united European Union is crucial to the continent's ability to safeguard its security and prosperity. The European Union has to project its values throughout this changing world. The Benelux firmly defends those values.

The Benelux continues to be a pioneer in strengthening the resilience of its internal market, fostering sustainable development and reinforcing security. In common interest of our citizens and our economies, the Benelux Union will remain a pillar of the European project. The European Union has to defend its values both at home, and throughout this changing world. The Benelux firmly defends those values.

We are reaffirming our determination to use the Benelux as a testing ground for European cooperation and model of regional integration in order to remain a source of inspiration for other regions within Europe and beyond. To this end, we have also taken significant steps forward to modernize the Benelux organization from within.

## Ukraine

We reaffirm our full support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity and condemn in the strongest possible terms Russia for starting an unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, which jeopardizes peace and stability in Europe and the world at large. We will continue to provide political, military, humanitarian and financial support to Ukraine.

We support Ukraine's fight for the core values of freedom and democracy. It is important that Ukraine fights back this aggression and regains sovereignty over its full territory. We stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes and as much as it takes.

The Benelux countries stand ready to work together to support Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction in the framework of the overall EU effort and together with international partners and financial institutions. In view of the winter that lies ahead, the Benelux countries are committed to supporting Ukraine's winterization. The reconstruction support is also an opportunity to assist Ukraine with rule of law and anti-corruption measures.

Our three countries have shown strong solidarity with Ukraine by supporting EU sanctions policy and implementing the different sanction packages in a fast and robust manner. The Benelux countries are making continuous efforts to coordinate with our international partners on sanctions implementation. We encourage partners, in particular candidate countries, to align with these sanctions in support of Ukraine. Also, we take part in international formats as the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, as well as in the NATO and EU framework, with a view to coordinate and deliver the necessary military support to Ukraine to defend itself against Russia's aggression.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine has had a deep impact on our economies, whose recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has been hampered by rising inflation, supply chain bottlenecks, and spiralling energy prices resulting from Russia's use of energy as a weapon. Together with our European partners, we have taken strong measures to mitigate the impact on households and businesses. Our priority remains the security of the EU's energy supply, a market that delivers affordable heating, electricity and fuel, and functioning cross-border transfers of energy within the EU.

### **Trade and economy**

In a global context shaped by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the rise in geopolitical tensions, as well as the lingering crisis of the rules based multilateral trading system, the Benelux countries reaffirm their commitment to support the EU towards an open, fair, sustainable and assertive trade policy.

The Benelux countries support the various initiatives of the European Commission promoting an assertive trade policy, ensuring that the EU is able to defend itself and its values in this time of increased geopolitical turmoil. The further development of the EU's trade policy toolbox will facilitate our engagement on the world stage in these tumultuous times.

At the same time, the Benelux countries underline the importance of keeping Europe open to investments.

The supply chain issues, energy crisis, rising inflation and global economic insecurity following the pandemic, Russia's invasion and other destabilizing conflicts affect our companies and competitiveness. Through our efforts to establish an ambitious economic policy, as well as through an active trade agenda, we can work towards diversified, resilient and robust value and supply chains, stimulate ambitious investments for the dual green and digital transition,

and ultimately ensure the resilience of the European Union. For this to happen, it is essential that we continue strengthening our partnerships, based on shared values.

The Benelux countries also aim to foster the EU's competitiveness by pursuing a strategic industrial policy on national, regional and EU-level, built on ambitious initiatives to remove legal fragmentation in the Single Market. This policy should facilitate cross-border dissemination of innovative products and services, orient industries towards leadership in future-proof green, digital and technological sectors and promote strategic autonomy in sectors such as semi-conductors. Such coordinated and aligned industrial policy should be developed within the existing EU framework and protect a fair level playing field within the internal market.

## **Energy and climate**

At the recent COP27, we addressed the climate and ecological crisis that humanity is facing. The Benelux countries stand by the outcome achieved at this COP. The package agreed on loss and damage shows solidarity with countries most vulnerable to and affected by climate change. It is clear, however, that the multilateral response to keep the 1.5 degree goal within reach must be stronger. That is why we will work together inside the EU and in progressive climate coalitions to ensure all countries will accelerate their efforts.

The Benelux countries consider that, in order to ensure a resilient European economy, trade policy must continue to find its role in stimulating the green transition and trade agreements have to reflect the Council Conclusions on the Trade and Sustainability Review— promoting common standards, market access, connectivity and sustainable value chains.

Together, we, the Benelux countries, have to face the challenge of climate disruption and changing weather conditions. Our regions are not spared by the impact of climate change. The unusually strong floods of summer 2021 were a stark reminder of this reality. We are committed to continuing to work closely with EU partners to finalize decision-making on the Fit for 55 package as soon as possible and to achieve the broader objectives of the Green Deal. The Benelux countries supported the actions of the EU to translate its ambition into concrete action by finalizing the negotiations on Effort Sharing Regulation, CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions of vehicles and Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry before COP27.

The energy crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine further encourages us to increase our energy efficiency, to reduce our consumption, and accelerate the shift to renewables. Accelerating the deployment of renewables in our region is the safest, the cleanest, and the most sustainable path for the Benelux countries, and for all of Europe.

This year, Benelux countries have further strengthened their ties with the Baltic States on the subject of energy transition. By working together, we can be key drivers in the transition to a Europe supplied with renewable energy.

We recognize the potential of wind energy and green hydrogen production in the North Sea area. In this context, we have furthered our effort to create a more united policy front with the Pentilateral energy forum. We reaffirm our commitment to strengthen the coordination

on issues related to gas supply as well as capacity, storage, and consumption and to explore the cross-border use of storage facilities in and from European third countries.

Further cooperation initiatives include the North Seas Energy cooperation and the Benelux energy expertise network. All these initiatives are a necessary step towards a transition to clean energy and energy security. These steps towards more solidarity in energy crisis management are an opportunity to highlight the actions taken this year to make the Benelux a regional hub for renewable energy.

We are committed to play a pioneering role in the EU for the transition to sustainable energy to build and rely on public private cooperation in this field and to explore CCS technologies. With this goal in mind, we commit to inform and accompany the public towards more sustainable practices.

### **Rule of law**

The Benelux countries remain at the forefront of preserving the rule of law and fundamental rights in the Union. We fully support the European Commission in the important role she plays as guardian of the Treaties and administrator of the Union budget. The conditionality mechanism is an essential tool to protect the EU budget and the EU's financial interests against breaches of the principles of the rule of law. We expect the Commission to thoroughly assess and closely monitor the situation and the effects on the protection of the EU's financial interests.

We also welcome the annual rule of law report by the Commission, which now includes clear recommendations for Member States, and reiterate our readiness to follow up on these. The article 7 procedures in the Council should continue, as long as doubts about the respect of the principles contained in article 2 remain.

### **Single market**

As we are about to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the EU Single Market. The Benelux countries mark this occasion with a renewed commitment to this cornerstone of European integration, which has created growth, jobs, and opportunities for European citizens and businesses.

The Single Market is one of the great success stories of our Union. Yet it has come under increased pressure over the past years. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the crucial importance of a well-functioning and fully integrated Single Market for the resilience of the EU economy. The numerous barriers and restrictions introduced by the Member States in the face of the crisis in order to protect their national markets and supplies disrupted the Single Market during a time when the EU needed it most. These measures infringed existing rules and overlooked the cross-border dimension and interconnectedness of our economies, adding on to the already existing legal fragmentation.

The Benelux countries underline the need for a fully functioning Single Market through common EU rules that remove unjustified or unnecessary obstacles to cross-border activities and facilitate cross-border dissemination of innovative products and services. Only a Single

Market that functions well during “normal” times can also be sufficiently resilient in times of crisis.

Yet any discriminatory, unjustified or disproportionate barriers in the Single Market are serious and need to be tackled. The Single Market’s biggest threat is not the next crisis, but rather the progressive erosion of existing norms and treaty-based principles. An affirmative role by the Commission as the guardian of the Treaties is indispensable for an effective and complete implementation of the *acquis communautaire* by all Member States. The full implementation of the treaty is necessary because too many citizens and businesses have not been able to take full advantage of the potential of the internal market.

Internal Market policy aimed at issues of supply chains or resilience of strategic ecosystems should be dealt with in a targeted and proportionate manner.

The Union should continue tackling structural barriers to the Single Market, as identified in the Commission’s report of March 2020 – which stem from the absence of EU rules, the insufficient level of harmonisation or the lack of mutual recognition – through new initiatives or targeted changes to the existing legal framework.

In order to maintain and further strengthen support for the internal market, it is important that everyone can reap the benefits of the internal market. A well-functioning internal market is the EU's main means of creating wealth and jobs. Measures at European level and enforcement must guarantee that competition is based on innovation and quality. A strong and a fair internal market therefore go hand in hand.

### **Enlargement and wider neighbourhood**

We reiterate our support to EU enlargement as a vector of positive change on our continent. The stability and resilience of the Western Balkans should remain a high priority for the EU and we reiterate that the future of these countries lies in the EU. We also firmly support that Ukraine and Moldova have become candidate countries, and Georgia was given a European perspective, and call on the Commission to follow up thoroughly on the conditions laid out in its recent opinions. We, the Benelux countries underline that all candidates and potential candidates need to be assessed based on their own merits, and following the Copenhagen criteria. In addition, the EU’s own absorption capacity needs to be taken into account. Particular emphasis has to be put on the respect of the rule of law, the fight against organized crime and corruption, the independence of the judiciary, the freedom of media, and the protection of minorities. A specific field of cooperation of particular importance stays border management and migration.

EU Enlargement needs to be about enabling the Union to be a stronger and more effective actor at home and abroad avoiding an institutional stalemate and debates about the fundamental nature of our European project. A successful integration of new member states requires that EU institutions function effectively and that EU policies are further developed and financed in a sustainable manner. The Benelux countries underline their readiness to contribute positively to this reflection process.

In the same vein, the Conference on the Future of Europe has produced a number of policy recommendations for the institutions to implement. We welcome these results and remain committed to putting them into practice. We believe that proposals can and should be implemented as far as possible within the current treaty framework. Following early exchanges in the Council, the Benelux countries also state their readiness in principle to examine the possibility to shift to qualified majority voting in a number of CFSP related areas, in order to strengthen and streamline the Union's external action. Furthermore, the Benelux Countries remain open to discussing institutional and policy reforms of the EU. However, given the current geopolitical and economic uncertainties, calling for a European convention in the near future is not considered to be the most conducive tool to reach this objective.

We recognised that, due to growing primary arrivals, and uncontrolled onward movements, our Member States are facing the biggest asylum and reception crisis since 2015. As this underlines the need to effectively contain secondary movements and to increase the effectiveness of return, we have once more emphasised our commitment to the existing cooperation mechanisms on readmission and return agreements and Dublin transfers between our Member States. We also underlined the need for strengthening partnerships of the EU with third countries.

### **Cooperation with bordering regions**

One of this year's priorities in the Benelux Union was the promotion of synergies with the neighbouring regions. Collaboration within the Greater Region, North-Rhine-Westphalia and the Region Hauts-de-France is and remains a key priority on our agenda for the near and remote future especially in terms of security and prevention, sustainability and mobility, labour market and market competition.

Our 2019 joint declaration with North-Rhine-Westphalia underscored our wish for closer cooperation. So do the concrete actions described in this year's comparative report with the Greater Region. Together with the Minister-President of North-Rhine-Westphalia, Hendrik Josef Wüst and the President of the Greater Region and regional council of Grand Est, Jean Rottner, we believe that our citizens already experience the complexities and challenges of a cross-border context in their daily lives.

It is up to us to develop the potential in areas such as crisis management, transport, security, education, energy, public health, circular, sustainable economy and more. Our regional proximity, a shared past and common cultural heritage imply that we share many of our challenges. Our borders should remain hubs of balanced mutual exchange rather than hurdles to overcome for our governments and for our citizens. Despite the questions raised regarding free movement, the Benelux has continued to favour systematic consultations at all levels to ensure that the Benelux and its neighboring EU countries maintain an open shared living space. Also, we will strive to improve and strengthen the cross-border cooperation in the fight against social fraud and in the protection of health and safety at work and decent working conditions.

We discussed and summarized crisis management structures and assessed the role of logistics during our event of *"lessons learned from the management of the Covid-19 pandemic"*. Our

conclusion for the future is that cooperation and coordination are essential to upholding security, safety and welfare of our citizens.

We recalled the work carried out in the Benelux framework on crisis management, in particular with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, the floods of July 2021 and the role of the Network of Representatives of European Crisis Centers, in which the recent crises were discussed and good practices were exchanged. All this work has further demonstrated the importance of good agreements and good procedures for exchanging information.

These experiences have resulted in the *cross-border impact check paper* urging national and European decision-makers to analyze the impact of their decisions on the economic, political, and cultural lifelines of the bordering regions and to systematically integrate these conclusions into decision-making processes. We welcome the Greater Region's support in the push for this initiative.

We have a long tradition of constructive cooperation in the field of security, constantly tackling new security issues in order to find cross-border solutions for the Benelux. Police cooperation within the Benelux is being strengthened by the new Benelux Police Treaty, which should enter into force in 2023. This treaty will simplify police cooperation in the Benelux, offer new possibilities for cross-border action and improve the exchange of information. It will also be an essential instrument in the fight against organized drug crime. In line with the free movement of people within our regions, we make sure to support cross-border workers students and pensioners in all relevant areas. In the field of sustainable mobility and cross-border transport, we support, together with North-Rhine-Westphalia, the Living Laboratory for MaaS initiative, to establish a common ground for the facilitation and expansion of a multimodal and seamless cross-border travel experience. Through such innovative and forward-thinking approaches, we want to increase the ease of use of public and low-emissions transport options that help us tackle our common needs as well as supporting our ecological goals. Further potential synergies, such as those identified in the European Commission's recent TEN-T proposal, are being explored.

We, the prime Ministers of Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands are confident that our Benelux Union remains 78 years later and for many decades to come a model of strong regional and cross-border cooperation and European integration.

\*

\*

\*