

Remarks by European Union Ambassador Dr. Christian Manahl on the occasion of Europe Day 2021 in Lesotho

I pay my respects to His Majesty, King Letsie III,
The Right Honourable, Prime Minister Majoro,
All Cabinet Ministers,
The President of the Senate and the Speaker of the National Assembly,
The Honourable Members of Parliament,
Their Lordships the Chief Justice and the President of the Court of Appeal,
Senior officials of the Judiciary and the Government,
Commanders of the security forces,
Members of the diplomatic community, representatives of the United Nations agencies,
Leaders of religious communities and civil society organizations,

Dear friends from the Mountain Kingdom,

It is now the second year that we have a "**virtual Europe Day**". Like in so many other things, both at work and in our contacts with family and friends, we have to rely on the internet to communicate, and in that respect, the pandemic has changed our lives not just temporarily, but for the foreseeable future.

We have all experienced a year of anxiety, restrictions, isolation, and loss. Only during this week, between three and five times more people have died of COVID-19 **every day** than the number of victims of the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. This is a terrible tragedy that has affected every region and every country in the world; it is the biggest global crisis since the Second World War. It is a tragedy that has forced us to rethink

and reorganize our relationships with our fellow citizens, with other countries, and with nature, with our planet.

In terms of our **relationships with our fellow citizens**, we have accepted stringent restrictions to our freedom of movement and our freedom of assembly, because these restrictions were necessary to contain the spread of the virus. As more and more people get vaccinated, we hope that these freedoms – two essential pillars of liberal societies – will soon be fully restored, so that we can again meet whom we want, where we want, and when we want, and as many as we want; that children and young people can go back to school or university, that sports and art performances can fully resume; that people can return to their workplace when necessary.

We also hope that teleworking and teleconferencing will continue to be practiced, so that we enjoy a greater degree of flexibility in the organization of our work and avoid time-consuming and wasteful journeys where they are not necessary. The technology for these positive changes has long been available, but it was the pandemic that has forced enterprises and institutions to make full use of them. We need to hold on to them now, not out of necessity, but out of convenience – and for the sake of the environment.

In terms of **relationships with other countries**, the first reaction in many places was the closure of borders, the closure of shops, factories, and schools, and a reflex of self-sufficiency. But we found out very quickly that it is necessary to strike a balance between protecting lives and protecting livelihoods, that complete lockdowns are economically and socially unsustainable. We also found out that no matter how tight we try to keep our borders shut, the pandemic can only be successfully contained and eventually defeated through international cooperation. In this respect, people, institutions

and economies have adapted quickly and shown remarkable resilience. After a dramatic worldwide recession last year, most economies are now on the way to recovery; global supply-chains have prevailed; people have learned to go about their lives and their businesses while observing basic sanitary precautions. And, at least in public health and medical research, we have seen an extraordinary upsurge in international cooperation.

In the European Union, the initial nationalistic backlash has given way to extensive coordination of travel arrangements, and to unprecedented agreements to finance post-COVID-19 economic recovery. For the first time in our history, the European Union has been authorized to borrow from capital markets, which means that member states **collectively** assume responsibility for the recovery fund. It may seem a small and technical matter, but in the history of European integration, we have crossed a watershed.

In terms of our **relationship with nature**, the pandemic has shown us how precarious human life and human civilization are in the face of unknown forces of nature. This should teach us humility – the humility of being part of nature, not thinking of ourselves as superior to it; the humility of seeing our planet not as a reserve of natural resources to exploit, but of assuming the role of **custodians of a fragile ecosystem**.

In no area has this become more acute and critical in recent years than with regard to our climate. The uncontrolled burning of fossil fuel, which has energized the industrial revolution, has put us on a dangerous trajectory with potentially dramatic consequences for human civilization. Unlike the pandemic, which struck suddenly, climate change is a catastrophe that is approaching in slow motion, but with consequences that can last for centuries. If we want to

change course, we have to act now. For many things, there may be a plan B, but there is no "planet B".

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

You probably ask yourselves by now, what has all this to do with the European Union, and with Lesotho. Indeed, it has a lot to do with both, and with our mutual relationship.

First, concerning the **European Union**, our 27 member states have over the past seven decades patiently constructed a union of peace, of prosperity, of freedom, and of solidarity. A political entity that has grown not by violent conquest, but by voluntary accession; a union that has established a world-wide network of trade and cooperation treaties that benefit all sides and that form the basics of a rules-based international market; a union that has contributed like no other country or entity to peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts, to development, and to humanitarian assistance in all corners of the world; a union that is built on fair exchange, mutual respect, and multilateralism. At a time when democracy, political liberties, and basic human rights are under siege from new forms of authoritarianism and populism, the European Union is one of the few bastions of liberal and democratic values. It is also a global leader in the fight against climate change and for a profound socio-economic transformation towards environmental sustainability.

It is true, these values as well as our commitment to cooperation and global solidarity have been battered in the early days of the pandemic. But they have shown their resilience, and over time the pandemic has shown the world that they are necessary – without global cooperation and solidarity, we cannot defeat COVID-19; nobody is safe from the pandemic until everybody is safe.

Concerning **Lesotho**, its economy has taken a double hit, directly because of the lockdowns and indirectly because of reduced SACU revenues and declining global demand for certain export products, and this was after several years of erratic rainfalls and recurrent periods of drought. But there are signs of recovery, and the Basotho people, like others, have discovered the possibilities of online learning, online working, online conferencing, and by doing so, they have discovered new opportunities of reaching out to the rest of the world. Promoting a digital economy is one of the key pillars of the National Strategic Development Plan and this is the time for the Government to take strategic decisions and to invest in digital infrastructure and IT-specific education. Lesotho has a surplus of well-educated young people who are enthusiastic about information technology and social media. By laying the foundations for digital economic opportunities, the Government can offer them a future in their own country and thus protect them from the dangers and hardships of labour migration.

Lesotho's political system, while still struggling with instability, has also shown remarkable resilience, which was demonstrated last year by a peaceful transfer of power in accordance with constitutional provisions. In many earlier instances, such moments of transition were triggered or accompanied by violence and civil unrest. Last year's peaceful transition is perhaps a sign that with the successful reforms dialog, Lesotho has turned the page of its violent past and is moving towards stable governance and resilient democratic institutions. This journey is not yet completed – the reforms recommendations still have to be implemented – but the process is under way, and as long as it progresses, there is hope for a brighter, more peaceful, and more prosperous future.

Finally, the erratic weather patterns of the last years have profoundly affected farmers in Lesotho. This should be seen as a warning signal, and an encouragement for climate adaptation. The mountains, which may have provided a degree of protection during the times of colonialism and apartheid, offer no shelter from a changing climate. Lesotho will have to make prudent use of technology to harness one of its key natural resources – **water** – not only as an export product to South Africa and elsewhere, but also for irrigated agriculture, for which there is considerable potential. In order to feed its people, most of whom nowadays live in the lowlands, and to explore new markets and new economic opportunities, Lesotho needs to upgrade its water management, and this includes the protection of wetlands, the building of infrastructures, and water diplomacy.

Ladies and gentlemen, Dear friends,

In all these areas, the **European Union can be a partner of the Kingdom of Lesotho**. We are already working together with the Government, the European Investment Bank, and the World Bank in a large programme to provide the infrastructure for water supply to the lowlands. This is a long-term undertaking which included the Metolong Dam in the past, encompasses currently the construction of infrastructure for bulk water supply, and can in the future expand into sanitation, irrigation, and industrial use of water as well as wastewater treatment. In parallel to this infrastructure development, the EU is partnering with the national Government and local authorities in a large effort to manage and protect the wetlands, which are essential in order to preserve Lesotho's water carrying capacity, and hence, its future use domestically and for export.

By supporting Lesotho in these endeavours, the EU contributes to an environmentally sustainable future for the Kingdom. Another component of the same objective is the EU's funding for renewable energy, an area where Lesotho has considerable potential.

In terms of governance, the EU has supported politically and financially the reforms dialogue and is currently funding the secretariat of the National Reforms Authority. We have also set aside funding for the reform of the judiciary and oversight institutions, with a view to strengthening this neglected pillar of the three state powers and enhancing its independence. At the same time, the EU is funding efforts of civil society organizations to promote human rights, including through their work with the security institutions.

Lesotho has a functional democracy with free and fair elections, freedom of speech, and a vibrant civil society respected by, and respectful of the Government. Sad to say, this is not the case in many countries around the world; so where these basic elements of democracy exist, we consider it worthwhile supporting them. The EU, which wants to be a champion of democracy and liberal values, needs likeminded friends in the world, and we count Lesotho among our friends and partners. We count on you in our joint efforts to stem the tide of authoritarianism and populism that is threatening democracy worldwide, because we know that in Lesotho, democracy is the also the result of a historic struggle against an authoritarian regime and military rule.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Let me conclude with a couple of personal observations. This is my last year as EU Ambassador to Lesotho. I arrived here almost four years ago with little knowledge of the Kingdom, apart from the fact that it has mountains and

– rare for sub-Saharan Africa – that it has snow in winter. In these four years, I have not only gained remarkable insights into the intricate political dynamics and acquired an understanding for the social, political and economic challenges of a society in transformation, but I also had the great opportunity to explore the extraordinary landscape of this Kingdom. I am deeply grateful to all of you, from the villagers in the mountains to political and civil society leaders, for offering me such a warm welcome and for guiding me through the ups and downs not only of Lesotho's highlands, but also of its politics. I hope that by leading the EU Delegation during these four years and through my interactions at various levels, I have made a modest contribution to the development of Lesotho and to a better understanding between Lesotho and Europe, based on our common humanity. I also want to thank my colleagues in the EU Delegation for supporting my work during this time and by doing so, for cementing the good relationship between the Kingdom and the European Union.

Finally, let me mention that we shall light the EU Delegation building in the colours of the European Union flag, that is in blue and yellow, on 25th May. We have chosen that day, Africa day, to honour the partnership between the European Union and Africa, as well as the partnership between the EU and the Kingdom of Lesotho.

I wish you an enjoyable Europe Day.

Khotso, Pula, Nala !