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Ms. Ursula von der Leyen

President

European Commission

2 February 2026

Dear President von der Leyen,

As democratic former Heads of State and Government and Members of Club de Madrid, we write to you regarding the escalation of coercive threats coming from President Donald Trump and directed at European allies. We have seen these threats take the form of financial sanctions on European states that enforce EU law against American technology firms, or the use of economic leverage, i.e., tariffs, to press Denmark into selling Greenland or France into joining his "Board of Peace" initiative for resolving global conflicts and the withdrawal of security guarantees through NATO to force higher Member State military budgets. These threats would seem to clearly reflect the "economic coercion" described in the EU's Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI) designed to counter situations where a non-EU country uses trade or investment restrictions to interfere with the sovereign choices of the EU or its member states.

While we recognise the value of the transatlantic partnership and shared democratic bonds, and are fully aware of how President Trump's "Davos walk-back" has temporarily cooled the immediate pressure to activate the ACI process, we remain firm in our conviction that Europe must be free to enforce its own laws on its own soil.

A case in point and one we would like to focus on is that of the specific tariffs and financial sanctions that the Trump Administration threatened to impose on European states that enforce EU law against American technology firms. While these sanctions have not been implemented by the Trump Administration, the broader threat of new tariffs in retaliation for the enforcement of this European legislation remains an area of tension in U.S.-EU trade relations.

The integrity of the European legal order hinges on the assurance that EU regulations are implemented without any outside interference. This is particularly true of laws designed to protect European democratic institutions and fundamental freedoms. As you stated in April, Europe's rules on digital media and market power must remain inviolate. Europe's powerful Anti-Coercion Instrument is designed precisely for these situations. Delaying its use invites further encroachment.

More is at stake here than trade and regulation. This confrontation concerns the very foundations of democratic governance - the rule of law; the right of nations to govern themselves without foreign interference; and their ability to protect their children in the digital age. At the same time, Europe must continue to take a proactive leadership role, demonstrating that defending democracy is about more than just resisting threat. It is also about shaping a freer and fairer digital future for all.

The question is not whether Europe can strike a deal, it is whether Europe and the rest of the world can remain free. Europe must be the world's bastion of democracy. Activating the Anti-Coercion Instrument would reaffirm the principle that no foreign actor can dictate the application of laws

within another country's borders. Europe must defend this principle for itself and the entire democratic world. By doing so, Europe will also strengthen partnerships based on mutual respect and shared democratic values. If Europe surrenders its right to self-governance, others will find it hard to stand up for themselves.

We therefore urge you to act immediately. Any delay will only embolden external pressure and invite further demands. It will also strip Europe of the power to prevent authoritarians from being artificially boosted into government by digital platform algorithms across the Union.

The Commission's recent fine against Google and confirmation of intended breakup was met with a comparatively cautious threat of a Section 301 investigation rather than the abrupt tariff retaliation that was previously threatened. Confidently enforcing your law on your own soil subdues demands, but inaction invites them.

We need not impress on you that Europe should certainly not consider trading away defence of its democracies for a security guarantee that may prove unreliable. The Union must preserve its own democracy and ensure that any external security assistance is contingent upon its sovereign ability to preserve rule of law and human rights. Our resolve to upholding European sovereignty is not an act of hostility, but rather a call for mutual respect between partners who share a commitment to democracy and the rule of law. In this regard, cooperation on security remains valuable, but it must never come at the expense of democratic integrity.

Together, these measures can restore a thriving, diverse media landscape, protect our democratic values and promote our digital sovereignty. The health of Europe's public sphere and the strength of our democracies depend on decisive action.

We welcome the statements of Chancellor Merz and Executive Vice President Ribera that Europe will not submit. At this critical juncture, Europe must demonstrate that it will not yield to coercive threats but will instead continue to lead with integrity, strength, and unwavering commitment to democratic values. By doing so, Europe will inspire others around the world to uphold these same principles. We encourage the swift activation of the Anti-Coercion Instrument to send a clear and constructive signal that Europe stands ready to defend its democratic order.

As democratic former Heads of State and Government, united within the Club de Madrid, we remain confident that Europe can rise to this challenge. We stand ready to support the European Commission in any way that may be helpful, drawing on our collective experience to defend democracy and promote the common good.

We therefore urge you to act immediately. Any delay will only embolden external pressure further.

Yours sincerely,

Kjell Magne **Bondevik**, Prime Minister of Norway (1997-2000; 2001-2005)

Jan Peter **Balkenende**, Prime Minister of the Netherlands (2002-2010)

Valdis **Birkavs**, Prime Minister of Latvia (1993-1994)

Joaquim **Chissano**, President of Mozambique (1986-2005)
Dominique **de Villepin**, Prime Minister of France (2005-2007)
Dalia **Grybauskaitė**, President of Lithuania (2009-2019)
Alfred **Gusenbauer**, Chancellor of Austria (2007-2008)
Ivo **Josipović**, President of Croatia (2010-2015)
Milan **Kučan**, President of Slovenia (1991-2002)
Aleksander **Kwaśniewski**, President of Poland (1995-2005)
Cristina **Manzano**, Member of the Board of Club de Madrid, Representative of Founding Constituent Member FRIDE
Rexhep **Meidani**, President of Albania (1997-2002)
James **Michel**, President of the Seychelles (2004-2016)
Olusegun **Obasanjo**, President of Nigeria (1976-1979; 1999-2007)
George **Papandreou**, Prime Minister of Greece (2009 – 2011)
Iveta **Radičová**, Prime Minister of Slovakia (2010-2012)
Jean-Pierre **Raffarin**, Prime Minister of France (2002-2005)
Petre **Roman**, Prime Minister of Romania (1989-1991)
Juan **Somavía**, Ninth Director of the International Labour Organization (1999-2012)
Hanna **Suchocka**, Prime Minister of Poland (1992-1993)
Jigmi Yoser **Thinley**, Prime Minister of Bhutan (2008-2013)
Danilo **Türk**, President of Slovenia (2007-2012)
Valdis **Zatlers**, President of Latvia (2007-2011)