**Script for the opening of the European Youth Congress “Regain or Retreat? European Youth in an Age of Uncertainty”, July 24th, ECS auditorium, Gdansk**

**Irene Hahn-Fuhr, director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Warsaw**

Dear Participants, dear Colleagues, dear Partners and Friends,

It is my enormous pleasure to welcome you in the name of the Heinrich Böll Foundation

to the European Youth Congress

“Regain or Retreat? European Youth in an Age of Uncertainty”.

This is already the 5th edition of the Congress, one of our flagship projects!

After its inauguration in Berlin in 2013, it has been travelling from our offices in Thessaloniki via Budapest to Belgrade. Next year, my colleagues in Paris might be in charge.

During these meetings we have discussed alternatives for building a more social and just, democratic and ecological Europe.

This year, we are happy to host around 85 young participants and about 20 distinguished speakers from NGOs and civic initiatives, progressive parties, and the media.

Thanks to our network of European offices, You come from more than 25 different European countries, big and small, north and south, east and west, from Portugal to Ukraine, from Finland to Greece and Turkey.

It is a colourful picture I am looking at, as so many of you are active in green movements, support civic initiatives for helping refugees and social inclusion or advocate women’s rights. This is also a result of our efficient cooperation through our European Department in our headquarters in Berlin, and especially its head, Sergey Lagodinsky.

Thank you, Sergey, it is wonderful you could make it to Gdańsk –

tomorrow, you will have the pleasure to listen to him on the panel on populism.

This profound European dimension of the Youth Congress is guaranteed to a wide extent thanks to our Partner, the European Green Foundation – GEF – that has been trustfully with us from the very beginning. I am happy and thankful for the great collaboration with Ioana Banach - who will address you in a moment –

and Reinhard Bütikofer, representing the board of GEF and opening our debates after our opening ceremony.

But: most important: I would like to emphasize that the European Youth Congress has been such a success story because we realize it together with strong local partners.

The European Solidarity Centre, in whose magnificent building we are right now, is a historical landmark in itself and one of our most trusted partners – it was the first institution I could think of when searching for the Congress venue.

Basil, thank you for hosting us here, and also your great team, especially Anna Fedas, for the invaluable cooperation.

I am also extremely happy to welcome a very special guest here – Ellen Ueberschär, the new president of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Following the old tradition of German and recent one of US presidents, for her first foreign visit she has come to Poland! Great choice! Especially in such challenging times, with Poland being one of the countries currently undergoing profound political conflict!

When looking at her biography, it quickly becomes clear why she decided to accept our invitation: when in the age of most of our young participants, she herself was an active member of Eastern Germany’s democratic opposition. She knows that you, young Europeans, most clearly see the challenges ahead of us and are genuinely interested in shaping our common world. For the last 10 years, Ellen was heading the German Protestant Church Assembly, where one of the last things she did in office was introducing Obama to 80.000 people in Berlin, to discuss civic engagement and responsibility in the face of global challenges.

Now she is here with us – Ellen, welcome and thank you for joining us! We hope to see you here in Poland regularly! Zapraszamy!

Before I pass on the word to Basil Kerski, to welcome him as our host, please allow me just a minimum number of technical remarks:

- As a green foundation, we have tried to keep the amount of paper materials at an absolute minimum. Therefore most information about the event and the organizers you will find on the USB pen drive you received.

Of crucial importance is the hashtag **#eyc2017pl,** that you can see on the walls of this hall, on your conference materials, and the like. We would like to invite you to make use of it as much as possible – on Facebook, Twitter and all other social media you are using.

This also refers to the panels and workshops: If time might sometimes be limited to place all your remarks, please post them on the Facebook event page of this Congress for further use.

You have all signed up for your workshop groups ahead of the Congress. They give you the opportunity to learn how to tell engaging stories with new technologies, explore ways by which education can foster green activism, and get to know examples of immigrants’ integration in practice. I am already eager to hear about your experiences and working results of the next three days on Wednesday afternoon.

Besides the three workshop groups, there is also the four “Comfy”-Groups:

-each of you has been assigned to a specific group with its own mentor – which is marked by the colours – green, yellow, blue and red – of the strings of your identification badges.

Please have a look at it now! Everybody got a colour? Great!

Your mentors will not only take care of your trips to the dinner venues, hand out public transport tickets to you and the like, but are also there for you to reflect on your experiences and thoughts.

Last not least, one special thing:

There is one person, without whom all of this would not have been possible: Gert Röhrborn, our program manager for democracy and human rights! Gert, your tireless effort on all levels, organizing this event – even when you are waiting for your second baby to come any minute - was really outstanding.

Please, everyone, join me in thanking Gert: Thank you!

I wish us all a wonderful time and engaging discussions! Basil, the floor is yours!