

7. March 2024

## **Ursula von der Leyen, the EPP lead candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission, at the EPP congress in Bucharest, Romania.**

Dear President Weber, dear Manfred, dear President Iohannis, dear Klaus, dear President Ciuca, dear leaders and dear EPP friends, thank you for hosting us here in Bucharest. What a pleasure to see all of our EPP family together. And what an honour for me to stand here and ask for your support.

Dear friends, when I was a child growing up in Belgium, my father often spoke about Europe, just as if it was part of our family. He kept saying, Europe is so precious and we have to take care of it because it is all we have. He said that often at our kitchen table, to me and my many siblings. I have 5 brothers and 1 sister. At that time, I didn't always understand why.

Today, I am the one telling the same story to our 7 children. I tell them that their grandfather was 15 years old when World War II ended. He had witnessed what it means if we allow hatred against minorities, against freedom of opinion, against fundamental rights, leading to deportation and the Shoah. His generation had grown up surrounded by lawlessness, devastation and negation of human dignity. And then the European idea came to life.

In 1957, he witnessed the foundation of our community with only six members at the time. He had seen the Iron Curtain descend from the Baltic to the Adriatic, dividing our continent for decades to come. In 1968, we watched in awe how brave Czechs rose up against oppression and persecution. My father passed in 2014. Today he would be so moved by what we have built. 27 member states with more than 450 million people. All of them living peacefully together in one European Union.

And the European Peoples Party, the EPP has pioneered this European dream from its very inception. I think we can be so proud of that. We, the EPP, have always stood up for the values that unite us. We, the EPP, believe in the rule of law and the respect of human rights. We believe that people should live in peace and freedom. We believe in the social market economy. We believe that access to health care and education is not a privilege for a few, it is a right for all. We believe that our children should be safe running free in fields and forests, on playgrounds and football pitches, as we did.



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They deserve that we care for a healthy future, with a healthy environment. Whether they grow up in the biggest city or the smallest village. And above all, we believe in the dignity of every human being. This is my belief as Christian Democrats. My friends, this is who we are. And this is what we will fight for in this election. And this will be more important than ever.

The world is as dangerous as it has been for generations. Russia's aggression tried to wipe Ukraine off the face of earth. The war is now in its third year and is more entrenched and intense than ever. We are seeing the potency and the dangers of a rising and disturbing league of dictators. The war in Gaza and the destabilisation in the Middle East. We see China and other's aggressive economic competition and distortion. And at home, Putin's friends are trying to rewrite our history and hijack our future. They are spreading hate from behind their keyboards.

And let there be no doubt what's at stake in this election.

Our peaceful and united Europe is being challenged like never before by populists, nationalists, and demagogues. Whether it is the far right or the far left. Whether it is the AfD, the Rassemblement National, the confederatia or Wasraschdene. The names may be different, but the goal is the same: They want to trample on our values, and they want to destroy our Europe. But we, the EPP, will never let that happen.

So this is a defining moment. The signal of Bucharest today is - that EPP is standing for Europe, strong and secure, peaceful and prosperous, democratic and united. We stand pro EU, pro Ukraine, pro rule of law in the spirit of de Gasperi and Adenauer, of Vaclav Havel and Lech Welesa. Konrad Adenauer said in the early days, "European unity was a dream of a few. It became a hope for many. Today it is a necessity for all of us."

And this is still true today – just look at the last five years. When Europe is united, we can move mountains.

And a special thank you to our EPP group in the European Parliament, under your leadership, Manfred. It is the largest and most united group. Together, we overcame a global pandemic. Citizens in every Member State, large or small, got their vaccines at the same time, and their fair share. Many thought it was impossible, but we did it. Together, we pulled our economy back from the brink of recession and put it on the path to recovery with NextGenerationEU. Many thought it was impossible, but we did it. Together, we are fighting



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climate change and coming to the support of those hit by devastating droughts, floods, and fires.

We did it. This is European solidarity. Together, we have delivered the pact on migration and asylum. We strengthened the European borders, and we will continue to do so.

To be very clear: We have fulfilled our international obligations in the past, we do it today and we will do it in the future. But it is us, Europeans, who decide who comes to Europe and under what circumstances. And not the organized crime of smugglers and traffickers.

My friends, this is what leadership looks like. This is the Europe that respects tradition, and knows that not every decision needs to be taken at EU level. But this is also the Europe that stands strong together when joint European action is needed. This is the Europe that delivers on what people care about. This is what the EPP will stand for in this election. We are proud of Donald Tusk for bringing the rule of law back to Poland. Kyriakos Mitsotakis for having turned Greece around to the road of success. Andrej Plenkovich for bringing Croatia to the Euro and Schengen. Evika Silina for the unwavering support to Ukraine. Ingrida Simonyte for fighting against Lukaschenko's instrumentalization of migration. Klaus Iohannis for his long-standing leadership in Romania, his support to Moldova and simply for being a great European. Karl Nehammer for tackling illegal migration and strengthening Europe's external borders. Leo Varadkar for his commitment on equality, full employment and infrastructure investment. Petteri Orpo for leading Finland into Nato. Nikos Christodoulides for his leadership in increasing humanitarian support to Gaza and bringing economic growth to Cyprus. Ulf Kristersson for tackling crime and championing a clean and competitive Swedish economy. Luc Frieden for re-introducing business-friendly economic policies. And Roberta Metsola for skilfully leading the European Parliament.

This is EPP leadership. We are the party of the people and we deliver on what people care about.

My friends. Prosperity. Security. Democracy. This is what people care about in these difficult times. And this is what the EPP will stand for in this election – thanks to our common manifesto. Of course, I can understand that many people are worried about the future. I am also concerned. At kitchen tables all over Europe mothers and fathers wonder: Will I be able to give my children a fair chance in life? Will I manage to look after my ageing parents? I know these concerns. But at the same time I am confident. And I am confident, because



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had anyone told me that in the last 5 years we would face a global pandemic, a war on European soil and the worst energy crisis in over 40 years, no one would have believed that we would emerge stronger. But we did it. We have proven remarkable resilience time and time again. Because the single market is our safe harbour. And our social market economy is our hallmark. It works for the people. Whether they want a secure job. Or they want to have a family. If they are saving for a house or renting an apartment. Or they want to study in a different city. Our message is clear: In times of change, Europe has your back.

But we have to strengthen our competitiveness in times of transition. We were the first to design the European Green Deal into an economic, social and industrial one. This has given a clear sense of direction for investment and innovation. Take energy. We resisted Putin's blackmail with his dirty coal, oil, and gas. We got rid of this dependency. We are massively investing in clean energies. For the first time we produced more electricity from wind and sun in Europe than from gas. This creates good jobs here at home, drives energy prices down and cleans up pollution. It gives us energy security.

And different to others, we stand for pragmatic solutions, not ideological ones. Because we in EPP, we know that there is no competitive economy without climate protection. And there is no climate protection without a competitive economy. And therefore, from wind to clean steel, from hydrogen to batteries, we will make sure that the future of our clean tech industry is made here in Europe.

My friends, we have to make business easier. We have to trust our companies to get on with what they are good at. That means less red tape, less reporting and simpler and faster procedures. This means paying special attention to SMEs, who are the backbone of our social market economy. This is an EPP hallmark. Give companies the freedom to innovate and create good jobs.

But this is also true for the farmers and rural areas. Farmers are telling me about the enormous challenges they face. They get up early in the morning, they work hard for the quality food we eat. But costs are going up and the prices they get for milk, meat and grain are volatile and often set by others in the food chain. Last month a young farmer told me that they are sometimes forced to sell their product below production costs. This is unacceptable. Our food security depends on the security of our farmers livelihoods. Therefore, the system must be put back on a sustainable footing. Their hard work has to pay off! I want to be clear, EPP will always be by the side of our farmers.



Now, dear friends, our collective prosperity rests on a foundation of security, so that brings me to my second point. When it comes to security there is no more pressing issue than Ukraine. I was in Butcha after it was liberated. I will never forget the body bags lined up. Innocent citizens, young women, old men killed by Putin's soldiers. And I will never forget the desperate parents whose children have been abducted by Russia. Their tears, their fears, their agony. And as a mother and grandmother my heart was bleeding to hear their stories. Putin is responsible. As he is responsible for the death of Alexey Navalny. And it was breath-taking to see the courage of those who attended Navalny's funeral.

One of the brave women said: "Navalny sacrificed himself to save the country. Putin sacrificed the country to save himself" Putin is wanted for war crimes, and he will face justice. There is a court room waiting for him in the Hague.

There can be no doubt. Europe will stand by Ukraine, for as long as it takes. With more financial support and more military support. Russia has destroyed houses, hospitals, and Kindergartens. But they couldn't destroy the dream. The dream of a free and prosperous Ukraine, that takes its place at the heart of the European Union. Today, the dream lives on also in Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans. And together, we will turn this dream into reality. That is what Europe and EPP will always stand for.

But security for Europe also means doing more on our own defence. Our common goal should be clear: we need to turbo charge our defence industrial capacity in the next five years. At the heart of this must be one simple principle: Europe must spend more, spend better, spend European. This will help us fill the urgent need to rebuild, replenish and modernise Member States' armed forces. And to keep supporting Ukraine. In doing so, Europe should strive to develop and manufacture the next generation of battle winning operational capabilities.

My friends, the EPP is the party that has championed a Europe that can defend itself – and we will be the party that delivers a Defence Union. This topic needs undivided attention. This is why we need a designated Defence Commissioner for the next mandate.

My friends, Throughout our history, Europe has never had security or prosperity without democracy. That is why previous generations sacrificed so much for freedom. The generations that defeated Nazism and overcame decades of dictatorship. The men and women that tore down the wall and ripped through the Iron curtain. The popular movement

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of Solidarnosc. The people holding hands in the Baltic chain of freedom. The citizens of the Velvet Revolution. Every single nation has its own similar story to tell. And this is what makes up the great story of our European Union. This is what my father told us around the kitchen table. This is what I tell my children.

And this is the very story we must tell over and over again in the coming months. This is what we are standing for. Democracy, prosperity, security. You cannot have one without the others. We in the EPP are ready to face the challenge. With confidence and leadership. For me it is an honour to stand here to ask you for your trust and your support. And it is the honour of a lifetime to serve our Europe. Let's fight for our Europe.

Long live Europe.

