

7. May 2024

**Ursula von der Leyen, the EPP lead candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission, delivered a speech at the European Economic Congress in Katowice, Poland.**

Dear Prime Minister, dear Donald, Dear former President Buzek, Dear friends,

What a pleasure and honour to be here with you today – in a city which symbolises so much of Poland's history and future. We stand here in this congress centre, on the site of one of Katowice's largest and oldest coal mines.

For decades the mine on this very piece of land was a vibrant economic and community hub – creating local jobs and producing energy for millions of people across Upper Silesia and beyond. But when the mines closed and the entire region took a hit, this city reinvented itself and its entire economy.

It took time, investment and courage. But today it stands here once again as a vibrant economic hub. And this time it is tech and science start-ups, it is entertainment and cultural venues, that are creating new jobs for young people, and driving modern industrial growth.

From hosting coal mines to hosting the UN Climate Conference in the space of barely 20 years - this city symbolises the transformative power of Poland and its people. It is therefore so fitting that Katowice is home to this European Economic Congress. And I want to thank Jerzy Buzek and Mayor Krupa for hosting us here today.

And it is an even greater pleasure to be here, in the run up not only to the European elections but to a very special and historic anniversary for Poland. A turning point – not only for the people of this country – but for all of European history. Because in the same week as Europeans take to the polls, we will celebrate 35 years since the elections of June 4th, 1989. The day the people of this great nation were finally able, to take their destiny and their freedoms into their own hands at the ballot box.

Those elections marked the birth, of what became a free, democratic and united Poland. They set the path for this historic moment 20 years ago, when this great country joined our Union and made it that much stronger and more complete.



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This thirst for freedom, democracy and shaping your own future, runs deep inside the people and history of this nation:

From the father of Polish independence, Józef Piłsudski, to the generations of Poles who rose up, resisted and rejected invaders and rulers, to the courageous and moral leadership of Solidarity and inspirations like Lech Wałęsa.

You know better than most, that freedom and democracy are not a given and need to be defended every day. Yes, there have been difficult moments in the last years. But today I want to say that: Poland is back.

It is not only back to its core values and principles that have shaped this country for over a century. But Poland is back as a leader of our Europe. Driving our economy forward, pushing for a leap forward on defence and competitiveness, and raising the alarm on some of the existential threats to our societies.

I want to congratulate Donald Tusk and all of his government and coalition for this leadership and for the change that you are bringing forward. And there are a number of lessons that we can draw from your success at last year's historic elections.

The first is about building broad coalitions to tackle the common challenges, we face – making sure that the centre holds firm against the extremes. Working hard to find common ground and avoid the polarisation of society.

The second is about getting the vote out and getting young people mobilised. Because this is their future which is at stake in these elections. Your success marks that Poland is ready to lead the fight for European's democracy and values, our peace and our prosperity.

And it was you, dear Donald, who said it best when you spoke to the hundreds of thousands of people in Warsaw on the June 4th anniversary last year:

*“The whole of Poland, the whole of Europe and the whole world, sees how strong we are and how we are ready to fight for democracy and freedom again, like we did 30, 40 years ago.”*

Dear friends: I want us to inspire ourselves from these words as we look forward to the next five years. Because this election is about resisting against enemies who



want to tear us apart from the outside – as well as their useful proxies and puppets who want to divide us from the inside. It is about protecting our values and standing for the rule of law and media freedom. And ultimately it is about our democracy, our security, and our prosperity in a more unstable world. This is what is at stake in June and this is what we will fight for together.

Dear friends, the picture I paint may seem stark – but we do not have to look very far to see how real and how existential this is. If we head east here from Katowice, it does not take long to get to the Ukrainian border. I have crossed that border countless times since the start of Russia's war of aggression. And what we see on the other side is the brutal reality of war – death, destruction and the depths of evil.

But what we also see is a possible glimpse into our own future if we do not act now. Because what is being played out in Ukraine – what those brave soldiers are fighting for – is also about us. As Poland has been saying from the very start – we should be under no illusions about Putin's intentions. This is a war which is about redrawing the map of Europe and shattering Ukraine's independence. But it is also a war on our Union, and on the entire international rules-based system.

Putin wants a return of empires and authoritarians ruling our continent and its people. And this is not an imagined or theoretical threat – it is an open and stated aim. Poland knows the threat bearer than most. Because of both, your history and your foresight. Just like countries across this region and from the Balkans to the Baltics.

We should have listened to you more before. And we should listen to you now when you talk of this existential threat.

Because we see this playing out across Europe – with swarms of negative disinformation, with far-right politicians being bought, with cyber-attacks and hybrid aggression using people, energy and technology as weapons. We have seen it again in the last days with the malicious cyber-attacks on Czechia, Lithuania, Poland and others. And we see it in the long-term cyber espionage campaigns against several Member States. The aim is to divide our societies from within and attack our borders from the outside.

This is why in response I am standing for a Union that is ready to do whatever it takes in defence of the rule of law, in defence of Ukraine and in defence of Europe.

Dear friends, the starting point for this is simple. The very best investment in our own security is investing in the security of Ukraine. I want to thank Poland for being at the vanguard of our united European response. Your leadership has been crucial in providing massive financial, military and political support to Ukraine. You have helped ensure that the European Peace Facility mobilised €6.1 billion for lethal and non-lethal military equipment and supplies to Ukraine. But we must continue. Europe will support Ukraine for as long as it takes. In the last years, we have shown what we can achieve with unity and action in building a more sovereign Europe on defence. With national defence budgets rising some 20% from last year. With more spending on common capacities and projects between Europeans. The European Defence Fund is investing in high-end defence capabilities in critical areas. And we have taken big steps forward in growing our defence manufacturing capacities – with Poland leading the way with your advanced defence industry.

Let me be clear: none of this will affect the importance of and the need for our NATO alliance. In fact, a more sovereign Europe, in particular on defence, is vital to strengthening NATO. And it has started to compensate for years of underinvestment.

But, dear friends, whether we like it or not: we are in an era of rearmament. And Europe cannot be left behind. And it cannot leave it to others.

The first task is the urgent need to rebuild, replenish and transform Member States' armed forces. Europe should strive to develop and manufacture the next generation of battle winning operational capabilities. And to ensure it has the sufficient quantity of material and the technological superiority that we may need in the future. That means turbo charging 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.

We need military capabilities made-in Europe – think for example of a truly European air-defence system pooling knowledge and capacities. And we need a thriving European defence sector to create jobs as return on investment.

This is why, if I am the next President of the Commission, I will propose a number of Defence Projects of Common European Interest. To ensure that major projects can get off the ground and be designed, built and deployed on European soil. And to



oversee that work, I will propose a full-time Commissioner for Defence to support and invest in a cutting-edge European industry.

One of the first tasks will be to present a White Paper on European Defence Preparedness together with the new High-Representative for Foreign Affairs. That should also include the threats posed by disinformation and manipulation. The idea will be to set out where we need to invest, how much we need to invest and how best to do that as we design the next long-term European budget.

Now let me be clear: Core action will always remain in the hands of the Member States. They will always be responsible for their troops and all decisions linked to that – from recruitment to training, from doctrine to deployment. This is the absolute foundation for every Member State.

But Europe also has tools and responsibilities in areas that are critical to our defence. From the Single Market to research, from innovation to industry and much more. We need to use Europe's combined financial, structural and political strength where it can have the biggest impact. Because Europe's defence is a task for all of Europe – with Member States and European institutions working closely together. This is where we shape our future.

And these things, ladies and gentlemen, go together. Because there can be no real security or industrial boost without a strong economy in Poland and across our Union. The good news is that over the last few years, the European economy has weathered the storm.

Many of the underlying fundamentals are good in relative terms: from improved economic convergence to reduced inflation differentials following the most recent crisis. Remember we put in place the SURE programme which kept people in work and companies afloat during the pandemic.

Now with cohesion funds and NextGenerationEU, our €800 billion recovery plan, we are working on crucial reforms and investing massively in key sectors for each country. This can go up to €137 billion euro in the case of Poland and I know the government is working hard to ensure all the milestones will be met.

All of this is helping Europe's economy prepare for this unstable geopolitical and competitive environment. But also for the new economic era we are in: cleaner, more

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digital, more industrial. Our focus at European level is to give each country, each industry, the best platform in which to thrive and compete. A central part of this is removing the red tape which can slow down small businesses. And it is about creating an environment where it is simpler, faster and cheaper to do business.

Allow me to mention a couple of priority areas.

The first is about making it easier to access capital. Whilst, in Europe, venture capital can be chronically hard to find, some €300 billion flows abroad every year, from European private investors. That is capital that our own businesses could use for their own growth. Conversely, a better integrated European capital market could generate up to €470 billion in extra investment in Europe every year. So we have to complete a deep, liquid capital market for our businesses and their access to capital.

Second is about ensuring we have the inputs we need for our industry and in particular, on ensuring our energy security and independence. As Russia started to move its troops towards the border with Ukraine, it also turned off the gas tap to blackmail the European Union. We all remember the fear of blackouts in Europe, of a cold and dark winter. These fears were real, but they have never materialised. Europe has not only made it through one winter but through two. This was possible thanks to friends and allies and the resilience of the European people.

The United States immediately stepped in with LNG and our trusted partner Norway immediately stepped in with more pipeline gas. And countries further away, like Japan and the Republic of Korea, worked very closely with us on global markets, to ensure our immediate energy security.

But of course, we also did our fair share, we helped ourselves. We filled our storages. We built new infrastructure. We bought energy together for the very first time. And we brought prices under control. But most importantly, we have worked on a structural response to this crisis.

We invested massively in renewable energy. We boosted our energy efficiency to cut our demand. And we are investing in the fuels of the future, like clean hydrogen. And the results speak for themselves. Last year, for the first time ever, we produced more electricity from wind than from gas.



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So, Putin's attempt to blackmail our Union has utterly failed. On the contrary, he really pushed the clean transition.

Dear friends, as I travel around Europe and speak to leaders, industry captains or young people – the resounding message I have is that this is our moment of truth. We are faced with many complex and competing challenges which are existential in nature, from climate change to Ukraine. We are confronted with threats to our core values from media freedom to the rule of law. We see it with historic opportunities – like reforming and enlarging our Union to welcome Ukraine and others back home to our Union. But while they may all be complex and different nature, the solution is the same.

European unity.

And the good news is that this is in our control – and we know we can do it. But we need a broad coalition for a strong Europe. We need the centre to hold firm against the extremes who want to go back to isolation and division.

Because, as Poland knows better than most, we cannot afford to be weak or disunited when history is calling.

We saw it last October when a record number of Polish voters went to the ballot boxes.

We saw it when you formed a coalition that could have been unimaginable just ten years ago. It was formed in a matter of weeks.

And we saw it in the spirit of those historic elections 35 years ago.

This is the spirit of Poland.

This is the spirit of Europe.

And this is the spirit that I want to take forward together, for the next five years.

Long live Poland.

Long live Europe.

