

24. May 2024

Ursula von der Leyen, the EPP lead candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission, at a rally in Steinhude, Lower Saxony, Germany.

Dear Friedrich Merz,
dear Sebastian Lechner,
dear David McAllister,
dear Hendrik Hoppenstedt,
dear friends,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be back in Lower Saxony with the CDU! I have spent the last few weeks travelling across Europe, from Athens to Copenhagen. And from Luxembourg to Katowice. And right across Germany. But Lower Saxony always feels special. There's nothing like home!

There are still 16 days to go until the European elections!

I'm keeping my fingers crossed for all the candidates! But especially you, dear David McAllister, our top CDU candidate for the European elections in Lower Saxony. Every vote counts! This European election is an election of destiny.

If I may look back: when I was born – after two terrible world wars – former enemies had just decided to approach each other. France, Italy and the Benelux countries reached out their hands to Germany. And welcomed it back into the circle of democracies. And thus began the unique European narrative. Big names like Adenauer, Schumann, de Gasperi. Back then, there were six states.

Today, almost 70 years later, this Europe is a union of 27 states, peacefully united, with 450 million people. Not only peacefully united, but also voluntarily united. Not a single country has been forced to join the EU. They all wanted to be part of it.

And that, dear friends, is why Putin is so afraid of Europe. Because he fears the power of freedom and democracy!



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Europe is a great gift. But there is no guarantee that Europe will continue to move forward. The European Union is not a foregone conclusion. It must be reaffirmed every day. So much is at stake! Our Europe is not just a huge economic area. Our Europe is the guardian of freedom and human rights. Our Europe is a guarantor of security and peace. And our Europe is built on the rule of law.

And yet we all sense that this election of the European Parliament will be different from previous ones. Because this peacefully united Europe is being challenged like never before by populists, extremists and demagogues. Whether it is the Rassemblement National in France or the AfD in Germany, whether it is Konfederacja in Poland or Vazrazhdane in Bulgaria – however different these parties may be called – they have one thing in common: Our Europe is in their way. They want to divide and destroy our Europe, and we will never let that happen!

But all the polls also show that the majority of people in Europe are convinced of Europe. People say YES to Europe. So this election campaign is not just about the question of whether you are for or against Europe, but we must also say what kind of Europe we want.

Let me illustrate this with three topics.

Firstly, there is the issue of the economy. Europe's internal market is the engine of growth and guarantor of prosperity for Lower Saxony and Germany. German SMEs export 55 per cent of their products to the EU. And the European single market makes Germany 132 billion euros richer – every year! And, dear friends, we want it to stay that way in the future!

And we have what it takes. Did you know that Werner von Siemens came from Gehrden near Hannover? He invented the telegraph line. He also developed the first electric locomotive, the first electric tram and the first electric lift.

Lower Saxony is home to medium-sized companies such as Mahr, Otto Bock and Carl Zeiss, which are at home not only on the European domestic market, but also on the world markets. Or Sartorius. Sartorius recognised the signs of the times earlier than others and focused on biotechnology. Sartorius now plays in the top economic league, in the DAX. And the company has pledged to make its business completely CO2-free by 2045. With 100% renewable energies. Or let's take a look at



the north of Lower Saxony: no other federal state produces as much energy from wind power as Lower Saxony. We have good prerequisites.

But dear friends, we know that competitiveness is not a sure-fire success. Now is the time to make it easier for our companies. They need more skilled labour. Energy costs must continue to decrease. More digitalisation. Better access to capital. And we need to dictate less to our companies and trust them more. That also means less bureaucracy, simpler procedures and faster decisions. That's why I want to cut 25% of the reporting obligations for companies at European level.

What our companies need is openness to technology and fair competitive conditions. It is unacceptable that we have high product standards here in the EU – rightly high standards, because people's health is at stake! At the same time, companies from outside the EU are flooding our market with inferior products that are not sufficiently controlled.

For example, giant e-commerce companies like Shein and Temu, which do not abide by our rules. Or companies that benefit from massive subsidies at home in China and then push into our domestic market and squeeze out our companies and jobs.

Let's be clear: we are open to trade, but this trade must be fair. Otherwise we will use our defence instruments. This applies to measurement technology such as biotechnology or wind turbines. For medical products as well as for electromobility. These are the growth drivers of tomorrow. And these growth drivers should create good jobs and prosperity here at home, not in China at the other end of the Silk Road!

Dear friends,

Europe's economic strength is one thing. We are doing everything we can to orientate it towards the future. The future belongs to clean technologies. And we know that there is no competitive economy without climate protection. But there is also no climate protection without competitive companies.

At the same time, we want to protect our nature and overcome climate change. Europe is unrivalled. In the north lies the Wadden Sea World Heritage Site. In the Baltic Sea, we have the largest brackish sea in the world. To the south are the European lowlands with large moors. And Europe is rich in forests. From mighty

coniferous forests in the north and east to the last primeval forests of oak and beech in central Europe and the cork oak forests of southern Europe.

All these forests work for us. They bind carbon, provide wood and other products, they filter air and water. And the loss of this nature would not only deprive millions of people of their livelihood, it would also take away their sense of home.

That's why we need to find solutions to preserve nature. And young people would never forgive our generation – and rightly so – if we were to shirk this task.

And that is why, for me, protecting nature is not just a climate issue, dear friends, but also a question of intergenerational justice. We owe it to the next generation to preserve our natural environment.

Ladies and gentlemen, Dear friends,

We want a Europe that not only benefits us, but also protects us.

Many people sense that our geopolitical environment is changing rapidly and radically. If Putin's cold calculations in Ukraine work out, we will no longer be safe here in Europe. Because anyone who talks and acts like Putin does not want peace. And nobody wants lasting peace in their own country more than the people of Ukraine.

We can never match the courage and determination of the Ukrainians. But what we can do is stand firmly by their side – today and tomorrow – and provide them with what they actually need to defend themselves!

We need staying power. Even if it requires effort, even if it costs money, we have to invest in freedom and peace again. Because the price we would have to pay if Russia wiped out Ukraine would be many times higher.

Europe must invest more money in defence. That is also in the interest of NATO.

We need to invest more wisely together. And above all, we need to invest in the defence industry in Europe. That is why we are in favour of a European defence union. And that is why I will appoint a Commissioner for Defence in the next

mandate. We want a Europe that can defend itself. Because we want to preserve peace on our continent.

Ladies and gentlemen, Dear friends,

When we talk about security, we must also talk about migration.

Last month, we in the European Parliament adopted the Pact on Migration and Asylum. After 10 long years, we now have common rules! With this pact, we are further strengthening Europe's external borders. We are ensuring faster and simpler procedures. But that alone is not enough.

Smugglers and traffickers make billions in business. They lie to people, rob them and put them on unseaworthy rubber dinghies. It is high time we took tougher action against this organised crime.

To be very clear: we have fulfilled our international obligations in the past, we are fulfilling them today and we will continue to fulfil them in the future. But it is we, the Europeans, who decide who comes to Europe and under what circumstances. And not the smugglers and traffickers.

That's why I travelled to Tunisia, to Mauritania, to Egypt. And I recently travelled to Lebanon. Such trips are not easy. But they are necessary if we want to fight the perfidious business of people smuggling at its roots. I am interested in pragmatic agreements, concrete steps, common interests and prospects. Because we can develop these with the countries of transit and origin. For example, when it comes to investing in clean energy. That creates jobs. Or when it comes to education for the younger generation.

But of course also when it comes to migration. On the one hand, it's about legal and safe routes for those who want to work here, who are looking for our companies and who have prospects of staying. But on the other hand, it is also about people returning who are not entitled to asylum in our country. There is a huge problem here. That has to change. Not only because our local authorities are on the verge of being overwhelmed. But also because democracy is only strong when it delivers solutions. And that is what we, the Christian Democrats, stand for in this election.

Dear friends,

If we tackle the challenges, people will not fall prey to those who rely on anger and hatred and spread division in society. Who do everything they can to fuel fears.

The public prosecutor's office is investigating the AfD candidate for the European elections on suspicion of money laundering and bribery for Russia. He has been agitating against the European Union for a long time. And he has never made a secret of his admiration for the autocrat in the Kremlin. The AfD has carried his propaganda into our societies. Then recently the handcuffs clicked on a close associate of the AfD's lead candidate. The public prosecutor's office is convinced that the man is spying for China from within the European Parliament. And the AfD's young cadres are categorised as "definitely extremist" by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. This has once again been confirmed by the courts.

Let me summarise: At war with our fundamental values. Propaganda for Putin. Spying for China. First the AfD rants about the people and the fatherland and then betrays them to autocrats. They should be ashamed of themselves!

Ladies and gentlemen,

I was born in Brussels. From an early age, I have experienced the richness of Europe – In the diversity of people who create something greater by working together. Europe is a community that has come together because of shared values. We are never perfect, but we believe in these values and we work to uphold them,

that they are upheld: the value of democracy, freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the dignity of the individual.

That's what this election is all about: what is really important to us? You can do business and have a career anywhere in the world. But where do people want to settle down and raise their children? Where the streets are safe. Where there are prospects. Where everyone has access to good education - school, training, university - regardless of how much money they have. Where everyone has access to healthcare. Where they have health insurance. Where there is lasting peace. Where they can move freely, study, work, across borders that no longer exist. Where

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you can build something that stays with you. Where the rule of law reigns and not arbitrariness.

That is what our European Union stands for.

That is what our European People's Party stands for.

That is what our CDU stands for.

That is what I stand for.

We want a strong Europe!

16 days to go until the election! Now is the time to roll up your sleeves for Europe!

Every vote counts on 9 June!

Long live Europe!

