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'Europe: a matter of the heart' – Speech by President Juncker at the European Parliament on the occasion of the debate on the review of the Juncker Commission

Strasbourg, 22 October 2019

Mr President,

President of the European Council,

Honourable Members,

It is exactly five years to the day since your Parliament placed its trust in my Commission and you have always maintained that trust. It is true that relations between us have sometimes been difficult, but they have always been courteous; tumultuous, but orderly. And I want to thank you for that with all my heart. Because to have the trust of this House and to be able to rely on the trust of European elected representatives reflecting European democracy is, for all those who receive that trust, an enduring honour. I see a lot of familiar faces here. I see many who have become friends – not just interinstitutional friends, but friends for life – and so I want to thank you with all my heart.

Just as I would like to thank President Tusk. We have been twin brothers. Even twin brothers can disagree sometimes. But we had the intelligence to hide our disagreements. So for you, it probably comes as a surprise that we did have disagreements. But I want to thank Donald for his unflinching cooperation, for a friendship that will last and that I am proud of. Friendships – a word used indiscriminately – are rare in politics. They are rarer still within the same political family, but without Donald I couldn't have done what I've done.

And, since I'm addressing this House for the last time, I also wanted to wish Ms von der Leyen good luck. She is the person we need at the head of the Commission and she must have all our encouragement and good wishes. Godspeed, Ursula!

I also want to thank my Commissioners. Because without them, I couldn't have done anything. They are men and women of whom, individually and collectively, Europe can be proud, and I thank you for that. Muchas gracias, obrigado, merci, vielen Dank!

When I took up my post in 2014, European solidarity was weakened by numerous rifts and ruptures. In 2014, Europe was unpopular, which is why I spoke of the 'last chance Commission'. But I wasn't speaking of the Commission *per se*, but of a Commission at the service of a Europe that wasn't working properly, since in 2014 we were facing a crucial moment in Europe's history. So it was up to all of us to make the most of the last chance that presented itself at the gates of Europe.

Together with my colleagues, I chose to create a political Commission. I wanted the Commissioners to be elected representatives, and this they were. Apart from the British Commissioner – and I've had two British Commissioners, each as talented as the next – all the Commissioners had been elected, either at national or European level. I wanted the Commissioners to be familiar faces, both in their own countries and in Europe. I asked them not to shut themselves up in Brussels, not to wall themselves up in the Berlaymont, but to travel, explain, talk with other elected representatives and engage with public opinion and, therefore, with citizens.

In the last five years we have held 1,815 citizens' dialogues. And the Commissioners have been to national and regional Parliaments 911 times.

At the start of my mandate I promised you that the Commission would focus on essentials, 'be big on big'. I wanted – we wanted – to put an end to the legislative inflation that had been typical of the Commission's work up to then. We have achieved that, since we presented 83% fewer legislative initiatives than previous Commissions. We withdrew 142 legislative proposals and modernised 162 existing laws. Could anyone have done better than that? We have done everything possible to achieve what we set out to do, but this doesn't stop people from continuing to play the old game of criticising the Commission for being present in too many areas and for concerning itself with everything. Prejudices have long lives in Europe. Everything has changed, but people act as if nothing has changed.

When I introduced myself to you, I had three leitmotifs that I wanted to guide the Commission's work: growth, jobs and investment.

We are now experiencing the 25th consecutive quarter of growth. We have had seven years of growth in the European Union. We have created 14 million jobs. Unemployment is at its lowest since 2000. 241 million Europeans are in employment. That's an employment rate of 73.9%.

The Juncker Plan has generated investment to the tune of €439 billion. At the start, when this plan was expected to fail and prove to be nothing but empty words, people spoke of the 'Juncker Plan'. Now that it's a success, people talk of the European Fund for Strategic Investments. That's the way it goes. Over a million jobs have been created thanks to this plan.

And we have re-interpreted the Stability and Growth Pact by making some of its provisions more flexible. We have done so against the wishes of many Member States who have never formally approved of the flexible approach with which we have enriched the Stability and Growth Pact, but the result is there – deficits have fallen from 6.6% to 0.7%.

By adopting this judicious, well thought-out and intelligent approach to making the Stability and Growth Pact more flexible, we were able to play an active role when Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece asked us to support them.

Dear friends, during my term of office I have known disappointments and achievements. Disappointments because, despite our efforts, progress has not been made on the reunification of Cyprus. Once again, time has been wasted.

We have not been able to conclude a treaty with Switzerland, despite intense and numerous efforts.

We have not succeeded in completing the Banking Union. Not through any lack of proposals by the Commission, but due to the lack of effort by Member States. If we don't complete the Banking Union, as we must, by making the Economic and Monetary Union into a Banking Union like monetary unions all over the world, we will not be ready to react to the next shock – be it internal or coming from outside.

Amongst the things we must do is our ardent obligation of setting up a deposit guarantee scheme. Without deposit guarantees there is no Banking Union and without a completed Banking Union there is no longer any Economic and Monetary Union. We must know how to react to these issues.

But despite the many crisis we have had to face in the last five years, we have also had achievements. I won't venture as far as to say 'successes' as I don't want to fall into complacency, much as I might like to. But we have had achievements.

I would first like to mention the social dimension of the European Union. We have succeeded in adopting the European Pillar of Social Rights, which was unpopular for decades. I remember talking about this already when I first appeared before this Parliament as a young minister of labour during a Luxembourg presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Even before the European Pillar of Social Rights was approved, we had made some improvements to the Directive on the Posting of Workers. And contrary to expectations, we succeeded in bringing Parliament and Council to an agreement. I think it can be regarded as a success of this Commission that we have established as a principle that everyone should be paid the same salary for doing the same job and the same work. It was the price that had to be paid if workers were to have dignity.

Besides, if we think we can build Europe and make it prosperous without the consent of its workers, we are sorely mistaken. Europe must also be the Europe of workers.

Another achievement, I think, is Greece. I mention Greece because it has greatly occupied and preoccupied me. We have given Greece its dignity back. Too often and for too long, the dignity of the Greek people has been trampled on. I wanted to restore to them all the dignity they deserve.

There were attempts to stop the Commission from acting in support of Greece. I remember the long nights with the governments of Samaras, Tsipras and now Mitsotakis – he was not yet in office – trying to resolve the problem of Greece. Many governments didn't want the Commission to be involved. I will always remember the telephone calls from several Prime Ministers who said: 'It's not your business. It's for the Member States to deal with the Greek problem.' But I had this naive, but fair, idea that we had to comply with the Treaty. And the Treaty says that the Commission is responsible for the general interest of the Union. It was in the general interest to prevent the disintegration of the euro area, and therefore we were right to do what we did.

Africa – yes. As Europeans, we can't forget our nearest neighbours: they are African. This is a continent that needs our solidarity. But not just our charity. Charity is a traditional reflex of Europeans, but what is needed today is to establish a genuinely equal partnership between Africa and Europe. Investing in Africa, creating jobs in Africa, that should be the mantra for our action, not viewing Africa solely in

terms of the refugee crisis. To view our relations with Africa only in terms of refugees is disrespectful to Africans. But let us do what has to be done on the ground to avoid unfortunate people taking to the seas.

Refugees, yes - a success, or not? Our track record is better than one would think, but it could have been better still if (as Parliament has done) the Council had followed up all the proposals submitted by the Commission to the colegislator. First in March 2015 on relocation and then in April 2016 on the reform of the Dublin system. But let us not forget that, thanks to Europe, we have been able to save 760,000 lives in the Mediterranean. 760,000 fewer deaths thanks to Europe's efforts.

In March 2015 I said what we were going to do about refugees. And Parliament gave me a standing ovation. I said then: 'You're applauding me now; are you sure that you'll still be applauding me two years from now?' The applause was less enthusiastic in the years after that, because in many countries domestic politics took precedence over the basic solidarity we should have shown.

I concerned myself a lot - something I didn't expect when I started out as head of the Commission - with international trade. It's a difficult subject and highly controversial in all our countries. There are often good arguments against trade agreements concluded hastily.

But we changed that. We concluded 15 international trade agreements. Today we have trade agreements with 72 countries, which represents 40% of the world's wealth. Trade agreements help us to be present on the international stage at a time when the U.S. is turning its back on multilateralism and therefore on organised solidarity with others.

We also need to talk about Europe's role in the world. Our greatest success and finest achievement remains the fact that we have been able to preserve peace in Europe.

It sounds so self-evident - but it is not. There are 60 wars being waged around the world today. None of them is being fought on the territory of the European Union, which has been the scene of the bloodiest military conflicts in recent centuries, even the last one.

Peace is not something to be taken for granted. We should be proud of this achievement!

Now, I am aware of the difficulty we imagine there to be in getting young people enthusiastic about the fact that Europe maintains peace. But when talking to young people it is also important to talk about this eternal dilemma on the European continent between war and peace. You simply have to look at the European Union's immediate neighbourhood to see how dangerous the international situation is and, as a result, how fragile the European Union's position is.

Young people must be told about war and peace. In 20 years, no Europeans will be left whose grandfathers or great-grandfathers experienced war. So we have to talk about it, otherwise people will forget what war means. That is why time and again I also talk to young people about war and peace.

Explaining the past is one thing, but young people must also be told about Europe from a future perspective.

So what is the future of Europe? We are the smallest continent. Most Europeans are unaware of this. As a continent, Europe is tiny. Policy is what must substantially bind demography and geography together. No policy can consider one without the other.

We are dying out. We will not vanish, but there will be fewer and fewer of us. At the beginning of the 20th century, Europe was home to 20% of the world's population. By the end of this century, Europeans will account for just 4% of 10 billion people.

Economically, we will hold less sway. A few years from now, not a single European Member State will still be a member of the G7 group.

Anyone who, in the face of these irreversible developments, still thinks that now would be the time for us to put less Europe on the agenda and retreat back into our national shells is making a fundamental mistake.

Europe means peace. But Europe, in view of our waning global influence, also denotes strength.

That is why we also need to consolidate our rules and decision-making on foreign policy issues. Once again, I make the case for us to have qualified majority voting in the Council on foreign policy issues too. Not on every single one, but on those where it is important for Europe to nail its colours to the mast.

I had a unique experience as President Trump's guest on 25 July last year in Washington, there to discuss - as we duly managed to - how to avert the unfolding trade war. How did we manage that? Trump, in one of his trademark lengthy introductions, described to me everyone who had already sat in that office and what he had said to them: chancellors (several of them), prime ministers, presidents.

And he said: 'I have already explained everything to them.'

I said: 'That isn't enough. You must also explain it to Europe.'

And then he said: 'How come?'

And I told him: ' Because the Commission alone is responsible for trade issues. Everything the others say – however ably they say it – counts for nothing. What matters here is what the President of the Commission conveys on behalf of the European Union.'

This left a deep impression on him, but an even deeper one on me. Because when you sit there, as a citizen of Luxembourg in Washington, and you say: ' I am the man!' – it's unprecedented.

Conclusion

So, to sum up:

I'm leaving office – not sad, but not bursting with happiness either – with the feeling that I have given it my all.

And if everyone gave it their all, things would be better.

I am proud to have been for so long – but especially over the last five years – a small part of something much bigger than all of us.

Take care of Europe. And fight stupid, narrow-minded forms of nationalism with all your might!

Long live Europe!

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