

Dinner speech by President Zuzana Čaputová on the eve of the award of the Charlemagne Prize in Aachen

October 1st, 2021

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Good evening and *Guten Abend*, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking Chairman Linden, Mayoress Kojpen, and the dear citizens of Aachen. It is a real honour and a privilege to be here with you tonight as we celebrate the efforts and achievements of President Iohannis, the 2020 *Karlspreis* laureate. Dear Klaus, I am delighted for you – my sincere congratulations – *felicitări*.

Aachen is a very special place. It proves how deeply rooted is the idea and the desire for European unity. This spirit is symbolised by the Charlemagne Prize, which you, President Iohannis, will receive tomorrow, for your long-term contribution to the building of our common European home.

A few years ago, Donald Tusk, then President of the European Council, stood here and talked about how every generation of leaders has to struggle for Europe. In his words, the first post-war generation had to rebuild and reconcile the Western half of the continent. The second had to reunite the West and the East after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

In his view, to which I fully subscribe, the task for the third generation, *our generation*, is to deliver on the promise of Europe. Tonight, I would like to delve into what this promise means in practice.

Simply put, the task ahead of us is nothing less than bringing Europe back into its balance. A balance between our rights and commitments. Between what we need as individuals, or as European states, and what is best for Europe as a whole. A balance, in which we can have different opinions, but where we are all bound by the values of freedom, solidarity, and liberal democracy.

Unless we restore this balance, the promise of Europe will remain just an ambition. After those who rebuilt and reunited Europe, our generation of European leaders must be the generation of guardians and protectors. Because the challenges we face today are many.

First and foremost, it is the threat to our liberal democracies posed by opponents from within and without. My good friend, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier recently said in Bratislava that democracy is either liberal or it is not. This is a simple and powerful truth.

Every single country that joined the European Union – and every single one that aspires to do so – must be and remain a liberal democracy. This means that the rule of law, separation of powers and independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media,

or the protection of minorities is sacrosanct. If these cornerstones on which our community is built are attacked, we must act to defend them, to restore balance.

We should not spend too much time discussing how our democracy is being undermined today. We know it. Instead, let us talk about what we are doing to defend it. Because a democracy that stops defending itself will soon cease to exist. In his *Paradox of Tolerance*, Karl Popper already concluded this, half a century ago: *"If a society is tolerant without limit, its ability to be tolerant is eventually seized or destroyed by the intolerant. In order to maintain a tolerant society, the society must retain the right to be intolerant of intolerance."*

Our democratic rights cannot be used to undo democracy itself. Irrespective of what some say, liberal democracy *can* have many faces. It *can* accommodate social conservatives, liberals or progressives. Europe and its diverse polities are the best evidence of it. While there is no single ideal model of liberal democracy, I am quite sure that illiberal democracy is a contradiction in terms.

Defending the rule of law means defending our freedom. As Spinoza said, *law is the mathematics of freedom*. Few understand that better than you, President Iohannis. You took action to defend the rule of law in Romania when those in power tried to abuse it. We must take equally resolute actions today and stop thinking that the problems will disappear by themselves. They will not. Our hesitation seriously damages our European unity.

The second major challenge we face in Europe is the fragmentation of our societies, communities, and even families. We see people standing against each other over multiple dividing lines. Be it on vaccination, LGBTQ rights, or migration. One of the reasons, if not the main one, is the growing – and often malign – influence of social media. We cannot afford to stand still and watch a good servant turn into a bad master.

We know what we are up to. Echo chambers and information silos. Loud opinions preferred over solid facts. Amplification of hate and anger. To protect Europe's balance, we must take the risks of social media as seriously as we take their benefits. We have seen during the pandemic that disinformation *can be* deadly. A crime is a crime, no matter whether it is digital or physical. The damage is equally real. So why do we continue distinguishing between them? Even online freedom ends where other people's rights begin. We are enforcing our laws and norms offline. We must do so in the online world as well.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are a Union of states, but we are also a continent of people with different backgrounds. Restoring balance means maintaining our diversity, but also our ability to understand and empathise with each other. We can proudly say that the EU enlargement has been a net social and economic benefit. But we can also understand and support those French

car factory workers, whose jobs have moved to Slovakia or Hungary. We should applaud Denmark's ambition to cut emissions by 70% in the next decade. But we also need to acknowledge that for many other countries, green transition creates a socio-economic burden that must be shared, for the sake of our common future.

Our starting positions are often different. And that is natural. Enjoying democracy and being open to the world for over a hundred years makes you a different kind of society than the one that had been sealed off and crippled by totalitarianism for decades. One cannot fast-forward disappearance of these differences. But reinforcing stereotypes will hardly help us restore balance. What we can do is to cultivate understanding and common solutions. Because empathy is a quality of the strong. But this must all take place, within the basic liberal democratic framework. That is not up for debate.

The tasks I laid out today are not easy. They call for real guardians – political leaders who do not stop seeking the right solutions just because the mood in the room has changed. Political leaders who do not think compromise is a dirty word but a natural part of any resilient society. Leaders who understand that liberal democracy makes us who we are today.

One of the lessons that the pandemic has taught us is that Europeans are perfectly capable of practical cooperation to the benefit of all. President Iohannis, as a mayor of your beloved Sibiu, and as the head of state, you have done exactly that. In this, you are a true inspiration in our common effort to protect and cultivate our shared Europe.

Thank you.