

Speech by the President of the European Council

Charles Michel

First, I would like to express my condolences to you, Klaus, and to all the Romanian people for yesterday's tragic hospital fire in Constanta. Our thoughts are with all those who lost their lives and their families.

Charlemagne. No other name lives in the memory of every European quite like this one. Charlemagne. The symbolic 'Father of Europe'. For 12 centuries, this name has burned bright. A beacon, leading Europeans to the persistent and indestructible message of a united Europe. So, it was only logical that this unique initiative — the International Charlemagne Prize — should be launched in this historic place, Aachen.

To pay tribute, year upon year, to the men and women who, for 71 years, have sparked to life the powerful vision of European unity. The very unity echoed in the name — Charlemagne.

De Gasperi, Monnet, Adenauer, Churchill, Spaak, Schuman, Veil, Delors, Havel... Iconic names all. And just a few of the prestigious winners of this prestigious prize. Names that stand out as milestones, marking our European journey. A journey that seems long when compared to a human life. But that is so short when compared to the 1,200 years between the coronation of Emperor Charlemagne, in Rome, and the signing, in that same eternal city, of the treaty that founded our Union.

Today we engrave a new name in the marble of European history — President Klaus Iohannis. And I feel both honoured and touched to hold the hammer and chisel, to engrave your name, my dear friend, dear Klaus, into the marble of European memory.

Allow me to quote from the Board of Directors of this Prize:

"In the eastern part of the Union, one man, in particular, stands out as embodying our shared European values, our commitment to upholding the rule of law and our shared vision of a European future: President Klaus Iohannis of Romania. (...) With enormous dedication and success, he has led Romania to espouse a pro-European policy committed to the rule of law. Iohannis strengthens the European Union (...)"

My dear Klaus, today, I will tell you a little secret. As a child, it was through Romania, without immediately realising it, that I started to learn about European values.

In 1988 — when I was 12 years old — at my local school in Belgium, I was touched by the Romanian Villages Operation. Just like millions of other children and families in Belgium and across Europe. It was a memorable operation, launched by Paul Hermant, a Belgian journalist. He came back from reporting on the 'systematisation' of the territory programme in Romania — the mad and destructive enterprise launched by Nicolae Ceaucescu.

In Belgium, some sixty endangered Romanian villages were supported through the concrete actions of Belgian municipalities, including my hometown of Jodoigne. This was one of my first tastes of solidarity. European solidarity in action. And I never forgot it.

The following year — watching the images of the overthrow of Ceaucescu on television — I began to better understand the price of freedom. The heavy price people are willing to pay when deprived of their freedom by a dictatorship.

Thirty years later, in 2019, we were together, Klaus, when your country, Romania, hosted the European Council in your city, Sibiu. It was also in Romania, that we all saw an EU Head of State using all of his constitutional power, and all of his personal courage, to guarantee the rule of law.

Solidarity, freedom, rule of law. These are the foundations of our common European home. They are both a credo and a commitment. Chosen freely, by free peoples, who have chosen to link their destinies.

Eugène Ionesco wrote: “To want to be of one's time is already to be out of date.” Our founding fathers knew this well. It is precisely because De Gasperi, Schuman, Monnet and Spaak imagined a time beyond themselves — that they were able to anchor the foundations of our Union for the benefit of us, the future generations.

Then came the builders. Giscard, Schmidt, Kohl, Mitterrand, Delors, and others. Brick by brick, they methodically constructed each floor of our common house — the Single Market, the Schengen Area, the Euro.

My dear Klaus, you are part of this great line of builders.

First, in Sibiu. Elected mayor in 2000, you got straight to work. Building and transforming the city — with a powerful mixture of ambition and common sense. And Sibiu thrived.

In just a few years, Sibiu has flourished into a powerful centre of economic development and prosperity. A radiant hub of culture, and a highly attractive tourist destination. A Romanian success story. And a European success story.

Much like an organ builder — whose patience, skill and talent live on in the music of their instruments, you have built a modern, open and prosperous city. Your hard work and vision live on today in Sibiu.

And you had equally ambitious goals for your country. Before becoming President, you said: “What was achieved on a small scale in Sibiu can also be achieved across the whole of Romania.”

Dear Klaus, I have known you, and worked with you, since 2014. The year we both entered the European Council. We cannot talk about your qualities, nor understand your journey, without starting from the beginning. Your origins.

Hermannstadt/Sibiu was founded by Saxon settlers in the 12th century. It was in this German-speaking community — today a minority, but a vibrant community — that the Romanian Klaus Iohannis was born and raised. And representing this minority community, Klaus Iohannis was elected, and re-elected, with phenomenal popular support in Sibiu, then nationwide.

At a time when identities can spark lively debates — and are sometimes abused — Klaus Iohannis embodies, for both himself and his country, the European motto: “United in diversity”.

We are all the fruit of our origins. Of a place of birth. Of the first language we had feelings in. And all of that builds us and shapes our identities that accumulate, layer upon layer.

But what defines us more are perhaps the deeply-held values we believe in. The more universal these values are, the more they are shared. And the stronger and more solid the communities we belong to.

It's possible to be a patriot of Sibiu, a patriot of Romania and a patriot of Europe. These superimposed affiliations enrich each and every one of us when we subscribe to the values of solidarity, freedom, and the rule of law.

And these values naturally imbue us with a propensity for listening, respect and tolerance. Klaus, you are the living proof of this. As President of your country, you vigorously and fervently defend the respect and inclusion of all minorities.

Listening, respect and tolerance are also essential at the European Council. There are no 'big' countries or 'small' countries there: everyone has the same say. The same ability to influence a decision.

The discussions there are sometimes rough. And confrontation is part of democratic debate. It's even useful. Because it allows us to move forward in our collective understanding, a key stage for taking joint decisions.

In this process, I can testify to this, you can always count on Klaus Iohannis: calm, methodical, principled. But courteous and always respectful of others' opinions. Determined to help find solutions.

You said one day, dear Klaus, that you represent 'the Romania where things are done well'. Allow me to say that through what you do at the European Council, you are contributing to the 'Europe where things are done well'.

As much as it's the past which shapes a community or a country, it's freedom that is an absolute prerequisite for building its future. And since 1989, that is what Romania has been doing.

With the patience and hope of the wine grower that slumbers in all Romanians, and that Tristan Tzara, another Romanian and French poet, described, with a hint of nostalgia, I quote:

"I caressed eternity, I believed in it,
and, in the sharp silence of the vine,
I buried memory and bitterness..."

Since 1989, Romanians have launched a golden age for their country. You demonstrate, also in your struggles, that democracy is the best school in which to learn maturity. You demonstrate this as a nation that knows how to combine history and modernity. Experience and dynamism. Wisdom and creativity.

And that proves, on a daily basis, that the European heart beats to the same rhythm in Sibiu, Bucharest, Vilnius, Rome, Berlin, Aachen...

I am telling you: the Europe of today has neither a centre nor a periphery. No old members or new members. And that is thanks to the transformations of which Klaus Iohannis is a master. Europe is gradually becoming itself once again. Diverse and whole.

Of course, we haven't reached the end of this path. Other nations wish to join the European Union and are on the same arduous journey. I know that you, my dear Klaus, are their tireless defender. Just as other winners of the Charlemagne Prize before you argued the case for Romania's accession.

European integration is, of course, the realisation of an ideal, that of a united Europe. But European integration is also about strengthening our position in a world that is both more interconnected and more unstable. That is the purpose of our strategic autonomy which, I believe, we must make an effort to strengthen.

That phrase, 'strategic autonomy', has various different connotations, and is subject to misunderstandings, misconceptions, and perhaps even suspicion. Those in favour of greater strategic autonomy for Europe sometimes suspect those who are more reticent of wanting to hold back integration.

Others think that greater autonomy risks weakening our Atlantic Alliance.

Nevertheless, I am optimistic. Because, I believe, we are currently - gradually but actively - clearing up the misunderstandings. On the fundamentals that lie beneath the words, the 27 have grown much closer. And recent geopolitical events have certainly played their part in this.

So, what is it that we are trying to achieve? We want less dependence, and more influence. Because we have values to promote, interests to defend, and citizens to protect.

Our greater autonomy must stand on two strategic pillars: socioeconomic development, and security.

The first pillar is economic and social. We are an economic and trading power. And we must use that power to promote an economically open world, based on reciprocity and a level playing field.

And to support a digital revolution rooted in our values of democracy, liberty and respect for privacy. And to succeed - Madam Mayor, you are right - in a fair and equitable climate transition. It is clear to see just how complex that is, how urgent that is, especially these last few weeks, with the energy price rises.

To be stronger on the outside, we must be stronger on the inside. It is vital that we complete the single market, the banking union and the capital markets union if we are to unleash our huge, as yet untapped, potential.

The second pillar is our security. The Atlantic Alliance is its backbone. Strengthening Europe's defence policy means strengthening the Alliance. Because stronger allies make stronger alliances.

2022 will be the year of European defence.

What is our roadmap? Starting on Tuesday, the European Council will hold a strategic debate on the place of our Union in the world, in the light of recent geopolitical events: Afghanistan, the situation in the Indo-Pacific Ocean, relations with China.

We will steer that process, in particular in the framework of the Strategic Compass, until the European Council in March 2022, at which European defence will be one of the main topics.

We are also set to draft and adopt a new strategic partnership declaration between the European Union and NATO.

The Atlantic Alliance has, moreover, begun to review its Strategic Concept, which will be on the agenda of a summit in Spain in 2022.

Our goal of greater strategic autonomy is not a new one. Already, at Sibiu, in our Declaration in May 2019, we said this:

'We will protect our citizens and keep them safe by investing in our soft and hard power and by working with our international partners. [And] Europe will be a responsible global leader.'

But I would like to conclude by quoting the first points of that commitment we made in Klaus Iohannis's home town: 'We will always look for joint solutions [and] we will continue to protect our way of life, democracy and the rule of law.'

That solemn promise, that oath - you are one of its most upstanding keepers. I would like - and I think I may speak on behalf of us all - to extend our most heartfelt thanks for your commitment, and for your invaluable, so vital contribution to the heart and soul of the European endeavour.

Thank you, and congratulations!