

President Metsola: Time to renew our transatlantic alliance

At Harvard University in Cambridge, President Metsola said that having a shared dream and promise, the EU and US must form stronger, mutually-beneficial, economic, social and security ties.

Dear Sviatlana,

Distinguished guests

Students,

Let me say how honoured I am to be here, to be invited to this great University and to be able to speak to you today. I feel like I know the Harvard Kennedy School very well. It's my husband's Alma Mater, and twenty years later, as with anyone who has studied here, it still comes up in every second conversation we have.

It is testament to the prestige of the University and its lasting impact. I say it to give some context. Twenty years ago, I was campaigning for my country to join the European Union, I was still a student, learning the ins and outs of politics. It was a hard-fought campaign. I believed passionately that my generation's place was in Europe. I believe it still.

The transformational impact of Europe on our societies, on our communities, on our standards, our economy, our environment meant everything. It was about our security, about strength in unity and the comfort of belonging.

We won that campaign. We took our seat at the table. I think very often of those days, and when we look to Ukraine, to Moldova, to the Western Balkans - I know how existential this is to people in those countries.

So when we talk about the 'struggle of relevance and value', we must understand that for millions, the concept of Europe is everything. It is not just a destination. It is a way of life and a way of living.

It is a, sometimes lonely, light that defends liberal democracies, free markets, social safety nets and personal freedoms. It is far from perfect. I share many of the frustrations with our processes but even with our imperfections, Europe is worth it.

It is this belief that has meant that the transatlantic relationship has survived the test of time - and the test of some administrations.

I sat down with a US journalist earlier and the idea of the US as a shining city on a hill was used almost in jest. But for so many people around the world who still live in the shadow of autocracy or under the threat of aggression, the US and the EU have not lost that shine. We tend to forget that still today more people live under autocracy than democracy. Just look at the struggle Sviatlana faces every day.

Dear Sviatlana, I cannot emphasise enough the strength I draw from your courage and resilience. I am humbled by how far your people are willing to go for what we, here, take for granted every single day. It is because of you and people that are fighting with you that Belarus will be free.

Sviatlana, and the people she fights for, live an everyday struggle for freedom. A word thrown around so often it has lost its meaning to many. We take a lot for granted: Being able to vote for who we like or read independent journalism. Being able to assemble, say what we want, debate and disagree, pursue our happiness, live and love as we choose without consequence. Many were surprised to find out that there are still those who call this into question.

Europe and the US have a duty and a responsibility. We need to live up to that together. To do this, we cannot be afraid to lead.

Perhaps we thought we won in 1989, with the fall of the Wall and the collapse of communism in much of Europe. If there was one lesson we learnt brutally on the 24th of February of last year is that the battle continues. Ukraine is standing up for the promise of Europe. For the values that we share.

The Second World War may have ended in 1945 but for millions it would be another 50 years before they could be free. Our Member States in Central and Eastern Europe know what is at stake in Ukraine. They lived through it for generations. We can break the cycle of history and consign aggression and imperialism to the history books where they belong. This takes courage. It takes leadership and when Europe and the US are called upon, we cannot turn away.

And we have not turned away. I am incredibly proud of our response - of the resilience we have seen in the last year.

In Ukraine, we have matched our rhetoric, with action, with support.

I am well aware that there are those who question the involvement of the European Union and the United States for that matter, those who prefer to pretend that what is happening in Ukraine is not real or who seek to excuse war crimes and breaches of international law. Those who prefer the simplicity of propaganda to the stark reality of war. Those who think they are too far away to care.

To those, I say the price of liberty is not too high. The European Union has prevented conflict within its borders by promoting – not subjugating - the interests of its citizens, by protecting democracy, the rule of law, respect for human dignity in all its Member States. Peace must remain the ultimate goal - but in order for there to be peace there must be a Ukraine. And, there will not be a Ukraine without our support.

Last year, in Germany, Bishop Dieser of Aachen said: 'The European Union does not need to conquer nor destroy anyone in order to be and to remain itself. But it is now having to learn - in deep and brutal distress - how seriously jeopardised its values and achievements are, and how many people, who also strive for these values, are dying or being robbed of their happiness.'

Dear friends,

Democracy requires effort.

Democracy deserves bravery.

Democracy needs leadership.

And leadership will be necessary to weather the storm of polycrises on both sides of the Atlantic. We are facing war, and with a post-pandemic economic recovery that remains far too fragile, energy bills and inflation still high, this means people find it harder to stretch salaries to the end of the month. We have migration challenges that are yet to be properly addressed. Raw materials that are becoming scarcer and damaging global supply chains. A climate catastrophe that cannot be ignored. Corruption damaging public trust. Rule of law challenges that threaten people's rights.

The EU and the US may well be old and close allies but as the global economy struggles to recover, we need to become ever-closer friends and form stronger, mutually-beneficial, economic, social and security ties. We need to avoid a race to the bottom. That is why a renewal of our transatlantic alliance is crucial if we are to face-up to the new and very dangerous realities shaping our societies and communities. It is true that there are those who wish to turn the clock back 100 years – we must be ready to meet that very real challenge.

The challenges are many and they are not only external.

Take the movement of people for example. Any business owner or financial expert will tell you that people are needed in order for our economies to continue to grow, to fill jobs and to ensure business models continue. At the same time, people also want to keep their villages or hometowns exactly as they believed they were 50 years ago. We hear less about the benefits and beauty of diversity and more about a sort of false nostalgia for a way of life we like to think existed once. We want all the benefits of a strong global economy without any of the cost.

It is just one example of what we all face. Of how easy it is to sell simple solutions or catchphrases that do not actually exist.

At the moment, in Europe, and on this side of the Atlantic, we are seeing these issues being used to bring back identity politics in a crude attempt to win elections by appealing to the very worst in our nature. It is the use of misinformation to create “the other” upon which we can blame all of our ills. Or the concept of the mysterious “elite” ruling in Washington DC or Brussels. It is a tactic as old as politics.

Its intention is not to solve problems or make people’s lives a little bit easier or a little bit safer. It is the last port of call of those with no answers. For whom power is of itself a goal. We need to counter this narrative and push back or watch as our societies turn on themselves fuelled by misinformation and distrust.

To do that, we need to rebuild the centre of our political landscape back into the force of global positive change we know it to be. Compromise, studied moderation are not outdated concepts - indeed they are the only way forward.

Every major issue faced by Europe in the last decade has seen us emerge from it by getting closer together. The financial crisis, the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, rule of law challenges, migration, security and defence – our approach has been to move together, to pool our resources, to cooperate more. We need to keep that trajectory going. That is not to say that Europe is homogenous or trying to be – far from it – we are all different, and yet we believe we should have the same chance, that we are fundamentally all better off when we act together.

The EU and the US are two of the strongest economic blocs on the planet, but our true strength lies in the fact that we are both not only about economics, but about something far deeper than that. We have a shared dream; a shared promise.

All of us on either side of the Atlantic must make our voices heard in defence of a strong value-based politics or we risk getting drowned out by populism and giving fuel to those for whom our way of life, simply by existing, is a threat.

We need to recapture that sense of hope. Of optimism. Of understanding. We need to keep listening, keep explaining and keep delivering. That is how we can re-create “the political centre” and avoid a retreat to the comfort of the fringes and the easy answers to difficult questions peddled by populists. That is how we ensure that our liberal democracies can answer people’s concerns, by showing tangibly, the value of democracy, of liberty every day. We need to do that better.

This is our moment. The time for our generation to pick up the mantle, to re-affirm the need and value of democracy, of multilateralism.

I am convinced we can meet this moment.

Thank you.

Further information

[Recording of EP President Metsola speech at Harvard University](#)

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