

Dear friends,

Thank you for having me here today, in beautiful Portugal as the world gets closer to two hundred days of war in Europe.

As we close off intense discussions at this Estoril gathering, I've been asked to speak to you about "The World Ahead".

I wonder if someone talking about the topic in 1945 would ever have imagined that in 2022, so many would have forgotten about the consequences of nationalism, of populism, of right of might.

Or someone giving a speech in 1960 would ever have imagined that while we are all connected instantly through our mobile phones, so many are more lonely than ever before - or that so much of our politics is more fragmented than before.

That all the knowledge of the world would be accessible at our fingertips online and yet so many seem oblivious to the lessons of history.

That 24-hour constant streams of news, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook would make many less impacted, less caring, not more. That Fake News or disinformation would literally travel the world at the speed of light.

I wonder if someone addressing a crowd in 1990 after the fall of the wall, would have imagined that the foundations of the liberal democracy that ended decades of fear, of lost generations, of oppression, would ever be called into question again.

Or that despite all the warnings, the world would keep overheating. That our rivers would start to evaporate and our forests combust.

Or that women would still earn less than men.

Or that while we are the wealthiest society in history, the gap between those who have and those who have not remains too wide.

Or that tanks would roll across European borders again.

I paint a picture that on the face of it seems bleak. But it is not. It is my attempt at a clarion call for change, a catalyst to activism, to shake up our role in society. It is my appeal to you to find your voice and speak out.

The world ahead is one that only we can create together. Destiny is not predetermined, it is forged.

This project we call the European Union was created to answer the issues our people faced. It was our future-proof way of ensuring that the world would remain focused on striving for justice, equality of opportunity and real democracy.

It took enormous courage to dream of a European Union. It took even more to make it real.

It was the dreamers who did that, who created this bastion of rights and circle of trust - of economic openness and pluralism.

And friends, despite the challenges, I look forward with hope. With optimism. With purpose.

Because it is true that we must face down nationalism and populism, but it is also true that we have millions of young Europeans who are engaged, who speak out.

- That for every pseudo strong-man on the rise we have people who look at politics as a positive force for change. For every autocrat threatening our neighbours we have a unity that has survived the pressure.
- That we may still have a pay-gap between women and men, that women's rights are still under threat, but we are passing legislation to address it.
- That more people than ever are being pulled out of poverty and hopelessness. That while discrimination still exists, our LGBTI community is less worried. We still have a way to go, but racism is less prevalent. That we continue to fight climate change and pandemics but we share fire-fighters, ventilators, vaccines and doctors across borders. We will be the first carbon-neutral continent in our lifetime.

That's the power of Europe.

And that, friends, is progress. Even if it is not always fast enough, not always deep enough. It is steps forward. That is Europe. That is what Europe has done and must continue to do.

But friends, Europe will only survive if we fight for it. If we stop taking it for granted. If we understand and explain its benefits. If we listen. If we push back against those determined to undermine it. If we are able to reform. If we are able to reinvent our project.

That is what the European Parliament's call for a Convention on the Future of Europe is all about. It is about ensuring that we continue the conversation to leave Europe fit for the next generation. There can be no sacred cows, no untouchable third rail. We cannot risk falling behind because our bureaucracy is too cumbersome to challenge, or allow narrow interests to take precedence. The last major reform took place a generation ago. We know that what once worked for EU18 is at its limits for EU27, and will not be able to work for EU32 or EU36. It is time.

Europe is not about creating everyone in the same likeness but it is the core belief that everyone, in all our diversity, should have the same chance.

Friends, above anything else, Europe is hope. Hope in the future. Hope in the next generation. A bright spark, a beacon of light. When we look to our East and see Putin's tanks, or China having risen with a value set very different to ours; when we look to our North, and see what Brexit has done; or to our West and see the deep societal divisions that Trumpism has exploited; when we look inwards and see principles that we took for granted, now being called into question - that is when the world needs Europe at its best. We need that hope. We need the values Europe stands for. And I want people to recapture that sense of urgency and of optimism in the potential of our project. Kicking reforms down the line is not an option.

To me, Europe always represented opportunity. Change. Possibility. When ten countries joined in 2004, including my own, this was the culmination of years of progress, of massive societal shifts. It meant everything. It transformed Europe. It gave a future to millions.

It took belief. It took courage. We need to find that courage now again when we look to Ukraine, to Moldova, to the Western Balkans, to Georgia.

Europe has the power to transform, but we have to find the political bravery to take that leap forward. To change the world. We can. We should. Because if we do not write the future, it will be written by those with a very different narrative and have a very different ending.

The world as we know it has changed dramatically. The axis tilted on February 24th with the brutal, unjustified and illegal invasion of sovereign Ukraine.

I am proud of Europe's response. We have stood with Ukraine, we have given military aid, political and diplomatic support, we have welcomed millions fleeing, we have provided funding on an unprecedented scale. We have shown that we care. Arguably, the most significant political move we made was to grant Ukraine EU candidate status. Because Ukraine needs hope. And Ukraine is fighting for Europe and we will not turn away.

Their values are what Europe stands for. It is those values that we must protect. And we must get better at explaining why these values are essential. Why there can be nothing without them. Why it is worth the cost.

Too often we talk about democracy, equality, the rule-of-law as if they are lofty concepts that belong in theoretical dusty library books. We need to demonstrate - every day - why they are needed and how they can make a difference to people's lives.

I mentioned earlier that we had the knowledge of the world at our fingertips, but technology means that we are facing an onslaught of disinformation wrapped up in peculiar type of populism. Where cynicism is encouraged, easy answers are floated as false solutions to difficult problems, where "the other" is dangled as the cause of all frustrations and woes. Where nationalists peddle fake nostalgia about a glorious past that never really existed. Where you are pigeonholed into black or white boxes, even if reality is a thousands shades of grey.

It is not easy to push back. But since when has easy been a criteria for action?

We cannot talk about the world ahead, without examining the world today. Right now, people are worried about their bills, about getting to the end of the month, about the world they'll leave for their children. They worry about the future and Europe must be able to respond. When people feel that democracy does not help to address their loneliness, isolation and frustration, people will be driven away from it. Economics matters. Jobs matter. Dignity and education matter, because if the extent of the economic gaps in society mean too many people feel alone and alienated, that is when they will feel that Europe has failed them.

Heating our homes, fuelling our industries and driving our cars is becoming more difficult. Inflation is keeping prices high. We know this. But when we grow weary and tired of the conflict -- that is when we will need to stand up and stand firm like never before. That is when the theoretical Europe must be met with practical leadership. With commitment and courage. And Europe must rise to meet that challenge. Whether it is tackling cost of living, electricity prices, climate change, defence, food security. The only way forward is if we are united.

And there are decisions that we can take now. That cannot wait. We can act together to limit the impact: whether it is capping of bills, fixing our pricing systems, or de-coupling the price of electricity from gas - there are things we can do now, even temporarily to offset the immediate pressure while we implement long-term strategies. If ever there was a moment for 'more Europe', it is here and it is now.

Friends, Europe is a choice - a choice countries made because they understood that our best chance is if we are together. We chose Europe.

Despite the many challenges and hard truths, I am optimistic. I am full of hope. I am confident in the possibilities of our time and when I look at young people across Europe I know the future is bright.

And I am convinced that because of Europe, the world ahead will be better than the one we leave behind.

Thank you.