

# Speech by Commission President Juncker at the European Ceremony of Honour for former Chancellor of Germany Helmut Kohl and Honorary Citizen of Europe

Mr President of the European Parliament,

Your Majesties,

Presidents,

Prime Ministers,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

and, for many of you here in the hall, dear friends:

Today we are saying goodbye to the German and European Statesman, Helmut Kohl. And I am saying goodbye to a true friend who guided me with affection over the years and the decades. I am not speaking now as President of the Commission, but as a friend who became President of the Commission.

In Helmut Kohl, a giant of the post-war era leaves us; He made it into the history books even while he was still alive – and in those history books he will forever remain. He was someone who became the continental monument before which German and European wreaths are laid, and indeed must be laid. It was his wish to say goodbye here in Strasbourg, this Franco-German, European border city that was close to his heart. This wish had to be granted. Today's memorial service is not 'not-German', it is European, and thus it is also German. We begin this day in Strasbourg and conclude it this evening in Speyer, in Speyer cathedral, with which he had a life-long connection.

Helmut Kohl was a German patriot. But he was also a European patriot. He was someone who brought together and reconciled things and people. A German and European Patriot, because for him there was no contradiction between that which is German, and the European, that has to be. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal said that he liked things that go together: *J'aime les choses qui vont ensemble*. For Helmut Kohl, German and European unity went together. Two sides of the same coin, as he, and Adenauer before him, always used to say.

He made Adenauer's maxim his own. And he put it into practice again and again through his thoughts and actions.

There are many examples of this.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was greeted with joy throughout Europe and the world. But German reunification – in which he always uncompromisingly believed – encountered resistance in parts of Europe, and indeed sometimes outright rejection.

Helmut Kohl promoted German reunification in many patient conversations. He was able to do so successfully because his reputation, which had grown over many years, allowed him to give credible assurances that he was striving for a European Germany and not a German Europe. He wanted German reunification with all his might, and outside Germany he was able to convince others of the historically correct path.

He was able to seize the mantle of God as it drifted through history for a brief moment. Not everyone in Germany and sadly not everyone in Europe sensed this movement of the mantle of God immediately. But he did. He sensed that German unity was within reach. He rightly judged and used the opportunity. Others would have failed in this epoch-making task. You could sense that this was a man of vision.

Helmut Kohl, with the German in view and thinking ahead to the European, always also looked towards eastern and central Europe. Not only towards Poland, but particularly towards Poland. He was not responsible for the crimes of the Nazis in Poland. But he was very much conscious of the historical responsibility that weighed very heavily on Germany. Just like Willy Brandt, with whom he became very close at the end of Brandt's life. Helmut Kohl and Willy Brandt: Two great men of our times.

For Kohl, enlargement to the east and the centre of the continent without Poland was simply inconceivable. This should certainly not be forgotten.

Helmut Kohl was not only the architect of German unity. He contributed fundamentally – more than others – to reconciling European history and European geography.

He was one of those who brought an end to the separation of East and West decreed at Yalta. Eastern and central Europe – and southern Europe incidentally – have much to thank Helmut Kohl for. Today we have to remember that.

On top of that, he was able to develop relations with Israel with intelligence and passion. He was a great friend of Israel. He also directed his attention wisely towards relations with the former Soviet Union and present-day Russia. The historian and Chancellor knew about the breadth and depth of Russia. But at the same time he was a committed and active supporter of transatlantic relations. Following in the footsteps of Helmut Schmidt, he implemented the NATO twin-track decision, against the spirit of the times.

Maike, my friends, I am probably the only person in this room who saw Helmut Kohl cry during a meeting. It was on 13 December 1997. On that day, the European Council, under my chairmanship in Luxembourg, decided to enlarge the European Union to eastern and central Europe and to Cyprus and Malta. During lunch, Helmut Kohl asked for permission to speak – which was unusual, because

he usually just took the floor. He asked to speak during lunch and said, choking back the tears, that that day, on which accession negotiations began, was one of the finest moments of his life. That he, as German Federal Chancellor, was able to witness that historic integration of Europe – after all the harm, as he said, that Germany had inflicted on Europe. Then he went quiet, internally at peace, and cried for many minutes. He was not the only one. No one was ashamed of their tears. Europe at its best!

He was also the main driving force, together with my friend, Theo Waigel, when it came to the euro. True: He understood how to represent German interests ferociously. He pushed through the independence of the European Central Bank, to be enshrined in the Treaty, in a friendly and then increasingly insistent way, against all resistance. He made it a condition of his agreement to the euro. Without Helmut Kohl there would be no euro. In his eyes, monetary union made European unification irreversible. For him, the euro was always European peace policy by other means.

And another thing that Helmut Kohl stood for: He respected all the Member States of the European Union equally. Large and above all smaller Member States felt that he understood them and with him they knew that their interests were in good hands.

One last thing. When negotiations were close to collapsing – as often happens in Europe – he led us on to the European path and did not let us get lost in our exclusively national side streets.

Mr President,

Lastly, Helmut Kohl was the man who continued the work of Franco-German reconciliation, ardently carrying on the work of de Gaulle and Adenauer. Although he did not speak French, he knew all about France, its history, its heartland, its regions, in particular Alsace, which he visited often and loved with all his heart. And he also knew by heart the establishments serving good Alsatian cuisine, of which there are many. History will preserve an image that says everything about Kohl and his intimate relationship with France. The day in Verdun when Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand held hands, they sealed the fraternal bond between France and Germany forever. The fact that we are saying goodbye to him here in Strasbourg, the seat of the European Parliament, of which he was a constant friend, a few hundred metres from the Rhine, is a dramatic, but also symbolic gesture of Europe. This beautiful city of Strasbourg, for him THE capital of Europe, as the seat of the parliament representing the peoples of Europe, is today honouring the memory of Helmut Kohl, the European.

Yes, Helmut was a German and a European patriot. For him, patriotism was never one patriotism versus another, but rather a patriotism experienced with others.

Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany and Europe pay tribute to the impressive life's work of Helmut Kohl. We do so in gratitude, indeed in awe. He has had an extremely full life. Some of the things that befell him, he will have forgotten by now. But many of them he will now still fondly recall. He knows

– as we too know – that he made Europe a better place.

My dear Helmut,

I think you are now in heaven. We would rather you were here. Promise me that in heaven you will not immediately found a local branch of the CDU. You have done enough for your party, your country and for our common Europe.

Many thanks, Helmut. Merci, obrigado, спасибо, dank u wel, dziękuję, mille grazie, muchas gracias, thank you.

Rest in peace, Federal Chancellor and dear friend. After a rich and full life, you have earned your rest. Eternal rest.