

Speech by European Commissioner Jourová at Seimas (Lithuanian Parliament) on New Unity or Old Divisions – Europe at the crossroads

Dear chair of the plenary,

Dear members of the Seimas,

Dear Minister Linas Linkevičius,

I am honoured to speak to you here in the Seimas today, especially in this unique year when you celebrate the 100th anniversary of the restored State of Lithuania.

The Lithuanian history could be a lesson of heroism and determination in fighting to preserve your language, your culture and finally in creating your State.

You used not only force, but you were also smart. Only the smart nation can invent a word '*knygnešiai*', meaning roughly 'book carriers'; a necessary profession in times when the Russian empire forbid the press in your language.

Throughout the history Lithuanians showed many times that you want to take the future of your country in your own hands.

In many ways, today's Europe is at the crossroads, and I am confident that your past could be a lesson for the entire Europe, because we also need to take fate in our own hands – if we want to survive.

Europe's past and the Europe of today – challenging times

More than sixty years ago, an 'Iron Curtain' between East and West divided Europe.

Many in Europe, in my country and in yours, lived without freedom, without democracy, in constant fear of ever-powerful state police.

Today, five hundred million European citizens enjoy a unique diversity of culture and traditions in a Union covering four million square kilometres.

But, today, we face new threats to our stability and security – from the inside and outside of the European Union.

We've been confronted with huge financial crisis, unemployment, untamed globalisation and digital revolution, brain drain, finally terrorism and migration crisis, not to mention the biggest crisis in the EU in the living

memory – Brexit.

All of this has its impact.

Everywhere I go I hear two main things that people expect politicians to deal with: inequality and uncertainty. Many people tell me that they have a feeling that justice is only for the powerful and that political class abandoned their interests. Many people simply feel afraid again.

That's why people turn to unhealthy nationalism or to populist movements that promise simple, yet dreadful solutions.

On top of that, the alliances we have known for generations start shaking. The transatlantic relations are undergoing a transformation under the current US President. The Russian threat, which was considered by many as something of the past, seems to be well alive, online and offline. China has become an assertive economic and political player.

European Elections in May 2019

This is the scene setter for the upcoming European Elections in May 2019. But I would like to warn against treating those elections as business as usual.

This time many of us worry not only about the outcome of elections but also about foreign meddling and disinformation in election processes – whether at the European or at the national level.

The Cambridge Analytica case sent shockwaves through our democratic systems.

On top of that, Russia has been identified as one of the main sources. Our team working on this since 2015 has identified over 4,000 cases of pro-Kremlin disinformation. Europeans expect us to remain vigilant. In fact, 7 in 10 Europeans including 66% of Lithuanians are concerned about disinformation online.

We cannot stay idle when the enemies of our democracy use modern technologies to manipulate our elections.

Lithuania's efforts to counter disinformation are one of the most advanced in the entire EU and we can only learn from you.

But we've also acted on the European level.

We have proposed an election package to quickly detect potential threats, swiftly enforce existing rules online and strengthen transparency.

And we have the most modern data protection rules, known as GDPR, that apply also to political parties and other actors in the electoral context.

Defining and defending Europe's values

In these elections in many places in Europe also the simple existence of the EU will be questioned. People will ask what the EU is good for. To answer

that question, it's good to recall where we came from.

Those of you who are a bit older, who are around my age, would remember how jealously we looked at the young EU, known then as European Communities, not because they were rich, but because they had freedoms we couldn't even dream of.

The EU's founding fathers realised that the price to pay for lack of basic human values is high and decided to enshrine them in the law; values like fairness, democracy, equality before the law and respect for minorities.

Yet, today we witness forces that question those basic values also in the EU; forces that want the return of power with no restraint, without checks and balances such as free media or independent courts.

Yet, we still remember that it is life without individual rights that is the source of fear.

The sad part is that those forces managed to build a contradiction between security and democracy. But it is democracy that offers the protection of its values to everyone, regardless of your birth status, connections or wealth.

And the rule of law is the bedrock of our democracy. Without it, the free press will eventually be attacked and labelled as fake news. Consumers will not be able to challenge the well-connected businesses, and we all won't be able to enforce our rights, either against the government or the companies who cheat on us or abuse our data. Without it we will not have trust in each other, and we will in the long run not have a functioning Single Market.

Bringing East and West together

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the last five years many people have asked me what is it that we have in common, the East with the West, the Lithuanians with the Portuguese, the Czechs with the Swedes.

The answer is that what unites us is the respect for these basic values. Then we can differ all we want, like true democratic Europeans, but we have to respect those basic foundations.

But we have much more work to do if we want to build a Union of equal opportunities and equal obligations. To that end, we need to also build more bridges between the West and the East of our Union.

We have to overcome the still existing economic and social disparities between East and West.

Lithuania has been doing very well in this regard in the last years. You have reached almost 80% of EU's average wealth in 2017, up from around 50% in 2005.

But still there are many of our children and grandchildren leaving the

country and heading to the west or the north because they don't see sufficient opportunities here.

We need to change that! I want young people in the European Union to have equal chances to find the best education and a good job no matter where they are born.

This is why I'm convinced that we have to put much more effort in creating economic opportunities by bringing more investments to the eastern part of Europe. And this cannot only be by the cohesion fund. The EU can help to create conditions to attract foreign direct investment and to bring well-paid jobs in innovative sectors.

This is already the case in Lithuania when it comes to life sciences. Biotechnology, medical devices and pharmaceutical industries are booming in your country and you are becoming a capital for this type of jobs not only in the region, but in the whole of Europe.

We need to strengthen the European investment funds and put more money into research and innovation. Our research and innovations program "Horizon+" will be funded with 100 Billion Euros for 2021-2027. You have to use this money wisely.

But we also have to realise that the next 7 year budget, will be a Brexit budget and that the net payers to the EU budget will look at every Euro twice before spending.

So, it's time to think of reserving the EU funds for those who respect these very basics rights and values we have talked about earlier. I don't want to punish any country, but in the future, our common funds should be invested in those that don't question the very core of Europe's soul.

The Light Touch Commission

In a year's time we will have the new Commission. I am hoping to hear from you what you think the next Commission should do, but for me, this should be a Commission of light touch when it comes to regulation, but hard enforcement of the existing rules, so it's not cheap to cheat.

Take the dual food quality for instance. Selling the same product with different ingredients in two EU countries should be illegal. So, I have proposed the legislation to ban such practices and I hope the European Parliament will manage to vote on it still next year.

But, I truly believe that there are things that can be better regulated on the national or even the regional or local level.

So we should take the concerns of many people about subsidiarity seriously and really focus on the core tasks for the EU. We should do less, but better and faster to address the real problems of the people. We should be smart, brave, but not intrusive, exactly like your book carriers.

And we should be a strong actor at the global stage. We need a united Europe

that defends its interest in international trade, in particular against rising protectionism. We need an assertive Europe that is a player in international rule making, show that we can set examples which become an international reference point, as we did on data protection. And we need to strengthen our cooperation in new areas to defend ourselves better in international security and defence matters.

The times we live in seem so dramatic and challenging that it is easy to think it has never been worse. But our parents and grandparents do remember much worse.

We, together, have created the most ambitious project in the world, the European Union. The Union with the highest employment rights, with strict rules for food safety and clean water, the Union without borders and with one currency.

Simply, there was never a better time to live in Europe.

But we have many challenges ahead and we have to fight to defend our values and fight for people's hearts and minds.

We can only do that if we have the courage to listen to the people and ask humbly to trust us to solve their problems.

We can only do that if we can show that the European Union can be assertive and can defend its people.

We need a European Union that is united by values, economically strong and that takes its fate into its own hands – just like the Lithuanians did 100 years ago.

Thank you for your attention.