

Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker on the occasion of the award of the Golden Commemorative Medal of the Charles University in Prague

Dobrý den.

Rector,

Vice-rector,

Professors, students, presidents,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to stand in front of you in this Great Historical Hall, in one of the oldest universities in Europe and one that has been graced by so many great minds and leaders over the centuries.

I am humbled to receive the gold medal of your University and to follow in the footsteps of the likes of Ban Ki-moon, Joachim Gauck, Angela Merkel, Wolfgang Schäuble and others.

But as a Luxembourger I feel an extra sense of national pride to receive this award from the Charles University. This is because it was founded by and bears the name of none other than a fellow Luxembourger. You did not know that, but I am telling you. Charles IV was not only the King of Bohemia and later a Holy Roman Emperor. He was also a member of the House of Luxembourg. He was proud of his dual heritage – even if he spent more time here in Prague than in the then Duchy of Luxembourg, which he gave in fact to his brother! Would he have spent more time in Luxembourg, the Charles University would be located in Luxembourg, but fortunately for you he spent more time in Prague.

In many ways this shows the true European roots of this University are real, a University whose history has also often matched Europe's. It was split up into German and Czech sections in the 19th century before coming back together in 1945. Its students and academics later played a leading role in the "Velvet Revolution" which paved the way for the end of one party rule and which paved the way for the creation of this great Republic.

The students of history in this room will know that our past helps us to understand the future – and that is what I want to speak about today.

[Standing up for Europe]

Europe is first and foremost a Union of people and shared values. We trust

and must defend peace, democracy, tolerance, solidarity every day. This University showed the true meaning of that when it stood in solidarity with the Central European University in its time of need.

That makes me proud of being European – something many people have become reluctant to say. Europe is and will remain the love of my life. But when I travel to other parts of the world, I see that they are far prouder of Europe than we are.

As we look to our future, we should not be shy about what our Union has helped us achieve. We have reconciled our history and geography by bringing together parts of Europe that were previously divided by an Iron Curtain. Anyone who goes to the south of this country can still see a part of the fence and watchtower that so visibly divided this continent for so long. Europe has helped to stabilise democracy and defend the rule of law. We have got rid of internal borders, helping to bring Europeans together and making life easier for millions of people. We have the highest levels of social protection in the world and provide shelter for the most vulnerable. We are a positive global force, investing in other parts of the world, leading the fight against climate change and helping to make the world a safer and a better place. Now more than ever a strong Europe is good for the world.

We have a duty to preserve and consolidate this legacy. To protect it against those who seek to divide us or to dismantle our Union. Europe's future must be about having the courage of our convictions. It must be about rediscovering that pride and that sense of purpose.

Earlier this year in Rome as we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the European Union, a new Europe of 27 vowed to do just that. To take Europe's destiny into our own hands. To move forward together and build a safer, a stronger Union. A more social, a more sustainable Union. A more prosperous Union. And a Union that stays united.

That is more important than ever at a time when our relative weight in the world is on the decline. In 1900, Europe accounted for around 25% of the global population. By 2060, it will account for only 5% – or even less. No single Member State will have more than 1% of the world population by then. That shows how much we will need each other if we are to prosper in the future in a changing and uncertain world around us.

[The Future of Europe]

Maybe this line of reasoning does not speak to those of you, in this auditorium, whose average age is likely less than the number of years I have spent in office. Maybe this does not speak to you as it does to your grandparents' generation – my parents' generation – who turned a post-war cry of 'never again war' into a political programme.

That is okay. But that is in fact, everything. It is all that generation ever wanted: that our lives would be so rooted in peace, in stability, that you might take it for the norm.

Europe is the greatest place in the world to live in. To be born in post-war Europe, and after the fall of the Iron Curtain, is to have won the lottery of life.

But what I would like to ask you, to ask us, is: what are you, what are we doing with it? What legacy will you, what legacy will we leave the next generation? Because Europe's future will be of your design. It is you writing the history books of tomorrow.

You might have heard a lot of politicians these days talking about 'The Future of Europe'. I am a little bit guilty of this. But in reality it is you who should be doing the talking. It is, after all, your future we are talking about. The ballot box is one. But there are also many debates being organised. The Commission that I have the honour of presiding has already held around 250 debates with people across Europe and debated with over 500 national Parliaments, social partners and there are many more to come. Vice-President Katainen will come back in autumn to have a Citizens' Dialogue with the students of this university – at least the rector promised me to invite him and the Vice-President promised me to respond positively to his invitation, so it has to be done.

We have seen many different views expressed already. Some are pushing for a refocused Union that does less more efficiently. Others are satisfied with the status quo, while some would like much closer integration across the board.

In this country, as with some of your neighbours, much of the talk has been about the so called "multi-speed Europe". I do not like that wording. I prefer calling it the Europe of different speeds, which is not the same. Because whatever the speed, the direction is one.

This is, as the rector said, already something that exists in Europe – look at the 'Schengen' border-free zone or the euro area. It is also not something to fear and not something that should be seen along "new" / "old" Member State lines. I hate, by the way, the expression "new" Member States, because being part of a team for more than 10 years is not new. So I will call them the "most recent" Member States.

The "most recent" Member States are actually the ones driving more cooperation in certain areas, not the ones being left behind. The Czech Republic is a staunch supporter of the Single Market. And the Czech Republic for example is signed up under enhanced cooperation to the European Patent rules when other countries including founding members of the European Union chose not. I am also delighted that the Czech Republic is one of the 20 countries part of the European Public Prosecutor's Office to help tackle fraud against EU funds, or cross-border VAT fraud.

This shows that when enough countries want to move forward together on a certain issue, they can choose to do so. Nobody is left behind as cooperation remains open to all our countries. And the "most recent" Member States are clearly advancing at a youthful gallop.

What is important is that we all go in the same direction, even if we do not go at the same speed. Different speeds are better than standstill. And what is important is that Europe lives up to the expectations of its people.

[A Union that delivers for Europeans]

When it comes to the debate about where Europe goes next I hope you will agree with me that there are some things Europe should not do. It should not regulate the flow of toilet flushes or the height of children's swings, for example.

I hope you will agree with me too, that there are some things that Europe must, imperatively, do and do better.

We have to do more to manage our external borders better and deal with migration effectively. This is something where I am convinced that only by acting together we can advance. The EU's migration policy has already helped us save over 500,000 lives since 2015 and reduce arrivals from Turkey by 98% in one year.

Europe's common Border and Coast Guard is up and running with a rapid reserve pool of at least 1500 agents ready to assist the 100,000 national border guards. We have deployed more than 800 customs officers and police officers in Italy and more than 300 of them in Greece.

The Member States of the Union also collectively took a decision to show solidarity with Italy and Greece and to relocate refugees.

It saddens me that the Czech Republic has only relocated twelve people last year and none since. And I was very displeased to read in the press that the Czech government is considering to halt relocations entirely.

I am trying to understand national sensitivities around this matter. But more than just a principle, solidarity is a state of mind that goes to the very heart of what the European Union is about. Solidarity is also not a one-way street. Those who want to benefit from solidarity, such as in the form of EU cohesion funds, must be prepared to show solidarity. For me the Czech Republic and the Czechs are very European. So it must be European in migration too.

Jointly agreed rules must be respected – *pacta sunt servanda*. As the guardian of the Treaties, the Commission watches over this – with the common European interest in mind. I sincerely hope that, as in so many other cases, the European reason, spirit and values will prevail and that the Czech government will re-consider its course so that we do not have to resort to legal infringement procedures, what we will do if nothing changes.

On the global stage, a united Europe is more important than ever. As others turn inwards, we have continued to show the world that Europe is committed to fighting climate change and to free, fair and rules-based global trade. Our agreement with Canada and advancing negotiations with Japan show our commitment to trading on a level playing field with partners around the world.

Tomorrow I will be speaking alongside Prime Minister Sobotka, a good friend of mine, as Europe decides how it can work better together on defence.

Three quarters of Czechs have said they are in favour of a common European security and defence. These are the issues that matter for Europeans and these are the issues we must work on – now and in the future.

Mr Rector,

What I want to say is what we owe to all the students that pass through these halls is this European commitment. We must leave them a Union they can be proud of and can improve on.

When I look around a University such as this one I am more than hopeful for Europe's future.

And I would like – and this is not demagogy – to dedicate my award to you: to the youth of today and the leaders of tomorrow. May your hope guide us forward.

I would like to finish on that note with the words of my good friend Václav Havel, he said:

“Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good”.

Europe is good. We must work for it.

Thank you.