

Speech by President Juncker at the Award of Honorary Doctorate at the Law School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

[As pronounced]

Prime Minister, dear friend Alexis,

Commissioner, dear friend Dimitris,

Friends from today and from former times,

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

I have to start by thanking the Rector and the Vice-Rector for their kind and generous words: “Ευχαριστώ πολύ”. Mainly the Vice-Rector’s laudatio was excellent. If my parents were here – unfortunately they passed away last year – my father would have been proud by listening and my mother would have believed each and every word you were saying.

I am humbled to accept this prestigious Honorary Doctorate. The fact that it comes from here, from the historic Law School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, only makes this more of an honour.

You were referring to a weak period of my life. Listening to you, I was not aware – before you have described my life – that I had such a rich life and such a rich biography. It sounded like a necrology – too early. You did not mention the mistakes, the errors, the failures which were part of my life. I was a student in Strasbourg, studying law. But I did not – I was more often in the Faculty of French Literature than in the Law Faculty. I succeeded to pass the exams, I had to go through. When I was made Honorary Doctor of the Strasbourg Faculty, fortunately they did not mention my grades. And I never had the intention of becoming a Doctor of Law. I stopped just before and I decided to enter politics because I knew that time helping people to discover my destiny, I would be Doctor Honoris Causa of this University. So I succeeded to that.

I have to say that accepting this award is probably one of the greatest days in my recent life. I was not really practicing law, because I was appointed junior Minister at the age of 28. So I had to stop what could have become a great career in the Luxembourgish Bar. The fact that I am honoured today – and the way you are doing it – is very important to me because the rules of this great University and the many great minds that have passed through it honour the one who has been made just a few moments ago Doctor of this University.

The lesson of Aristotle is in fact very simple. We must never lose sight of what keeps us together. The values that we share. The society that we work in. And the compassion and solidarity that we show each other. This is what the European Union is built on. And this is what we must keep fighting for as Europe looks forward to its future.

There is no better place to do that than here in Greece. And let me say how much of a delight it is to be back here. You know, if you are delivering public speeches you are told by those who are surrounding you that you have to say at the very beginning of each speech "I am happy to be here". Normally it is not true. But tonight it is true because I love this country and those living here.

I was trying throughout my career to be helpful to Greece. "Helpful" is a bad expression – I wanted to be loyal to the legacy of this big nation. Sometimes I am reading in German papers and others – Austrian, Dutch – that Greece is a small country. That is not true; Greece is a big nation. And that is the reason why I fell in love with this nation. And I was trying throughout my career – President of the Eurogroup, President of the Commission, Prime Minister, whatsoever – to respect the dignity of the Greek people. Because the dignity of the Greek people was not respected by all of the Europeans and I wanted to have this dignity respected.

Now it is time to turn the page. And that is exactly what Greece has been doing. Today, confidence, stability and growth are returning. The economy is set to grow by 2.1% in 2017 and 2.5% in 2018 – if you continue the reform process, my dear Alexis. I was Prime Minister for 18 years, try to do the same – but it is not for sure that you will have this long period. But I am happy with what the Prime Minister and the Greek Government are doing – and the Greek people before them. This is a huge performance.

There are less Greeks out of a job than was the situation years ago. And the fiscal surplus is eight times higher than the target for last year and already above the target for the end of the programme in mid-2018.

That progress is down to the wide-ranging reforms this country has put into place over the last years. And I am grateful, I am paying tribute to those Greeks nobody knows. The poorer part of the society, they were paying the price. Not the elites were paying the price – the poorer part of this country was paying the price and in no other country this would have been possible. Respectfully I am greeting the Greek people – a great people!

Now we are moving to the future. It is a brighter future than the one we could have imagined years ago; prosperity is returning. The European Commission I have the honour to preside is not giving money to Greece, but is – together with the Greek Government and the Greek Parliament – trying to put into place a future-oriented programme worth of EUR 35 billion including social issues.

The so-called Juncker Plan is working in Greece. It was called the Juncker Plan when it started; because people thought that this will be a total failure and so they wanted to pre-identify the one who would be guilty for

the failure. Now that it is working it is called the European Fund for Strategic Investments, but it is exactly the same. And Greece is one of the beneficiaries from this programme, because I thought when starting my job in Brussels that the European Union should not be identified by austerity, brutal measures against the weakest in our society. But I thought that it would be worth to restart what has been the strength of Europe for the last decades: the investments. Investments are important and that is exactly what we did. And we did it with the help of the Greek authorities, the Greek Government, the Greek Parliament, and now we are seeing that this is producing benefits in Europe and in this beloved country.

In one word as in thousands, I am happy to be here. I think that I was rightly appointed Doctor Honoris Causa of this University. And I know that some of my colleagues – Dimitris, Margaritis – were studying here. I am happy to discover the improved quality of this University today. But I am happy to have these guys in “my” Commission. I am happy to be here.

I will continue to be a friend of Greece. It is easy to say today. But when I was saying – Evangelos, you were there for a longer moment; Alexis too – that I will stand for Greece, there was no applause. Today everyone is saying: it was the right idea to keep Greece in the euro area. Would they have said it before, I would have had more leisure than I had. As I was a friend of Greece when Greece had few friends, I want to stay a friend of Greece for the coming years.

“ΜΑΖΙ ΘΑ ΠΕΤΥΧΟΥΜΕ!” – for those who are less fluent in Greek than I am, that means: “Together we will succeed”.

Thank you so much.