

Speech by President Juncker on the occasion of the award ceremony for the honorary membership of the National Order of Merit

Mr President,

Mr Prime Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Excellencies,

And for so many of you, dear friends,

I am truly proud and grateful to be here today and to receive this honour.

'For Gallantry' – these are the words inscribed on the cross that is branded on the Maltese flag. They are words as symbolic of this country today and as they were in the past. The qualities of the Maltese people are numerous: Tolerance, openness, resilience.

Malta is defending truly European values that I would like to pay tribute to today. They are values that must always be protected and never taken for granted. They define who we are as people. They form the ties that bind us as a Union.

This means the respect of the rule of law, the fight against corruption and crime and freedom of the press. These are non-negotiable European values.

At the start of my campaign for President of the European Commission back in 2014, I chose Malta as the place to present my plan to introduce more solidarity in the European migration policy. That was not a coincidence.

I said it then and I believe it as strongly today: It cannot be that a small island in the Mediterranean has to bear the full weight of migration towards Europe. Yet often you have to. And each time, you show the utmost bravery and humanity. Because this is who you are. And this is what our Union should be.

You are not alone. Europe stands with you. And I stand with you. This is what I have fought for during my mandate as President of the European Commission. In fact, I am proud of what we have achieved together. We have offered protection and support to millions. We have saved lives, dismantled smuggling networks and brought irregular arrivals to Europe down to the lowest level recorded in five years.

We all know there is still work to be done, but solidarity should always be there. We need to find long-term sustainable solutions. I would sincerely

like to thank the Prime Minister for having successfully forged a constructive dialogue in Europe and beyond Europe. The European table is never an easy one to broker at, but Malta's stewardship has and will continue to remain central to bring European solutions to results.

In Malta, the proportion of people who believe that everyone has a chance to succeed in life is higher than anywhere else in Europe. This says a lot about who you are and how open you are. Peace, respect for human life, human rights and democracy are what the Maltese people value the most.

This is a small country – the smallest in the EU. That is why I was so happy when Malta joined the European Union, because that very day Luxembourg stopped being the smallest country in the European Union. But being Luxembourger and half-Maltese, I know that small countries have the biggest hearts.

It comes as no surprise to me that when Europeans went to the polls in May, Malta had one of the highest turnouts. When others choose to look inwards, you remained looking outwards, towards Europe and the values we share as a Union.

It is because of this openness that your country is also resilient. The Maltese economy is proving to be more resilient than most in Europe. In fact, it is projected to grow faster than any other this year, three times as fast to be precise. Unemployment and youth unemployment are both well below the EU average.

To be resilient is to be capable of adapting to change. You are leading the way by shifting towards a fast growing services sector, adapting to the digital age, and keeping the Maltese financial sector open.

And the European Union is always there to assist you in any way it can. Over the last five years, we have invested nearly EUR 2,000 per Maltese citizen. By 2020, we expect this to give 32,000 people better access to water supplies and to over 150,000 people access to better healthcare services.

As you look to the future, it is important that you build on this positive momentum. Knowing well the financial forces of this world, good fortune can never be taken for granted. Malta must invest wisely in a sustainable future to retain the essence and charm of what has always made it the special jewel in the Mediterranean.

There are many ways in which our resilience can be put to the test, most of all when our fundamental values risk being undermined. My message to you today is the following: Never stop defending them. We will not, because this is the European way.

Our common history, that once bound us so strongly together, is a distant memory in the minds of many and absent from our youth. This is a generation that does not love Europe unconditionally, but asks questions, demands answers and expects results.

Second only to Cyprus, young voters make up more of the national population

here than anywhere else in the European Union. For the first time this year, 16-year olds in Malta were able to vote in the national and European elections. Young people have considerable power here. But to truly empower our youth, is not only to give them a voice, it is to listen to what they say.

We need to listen. You do not have to believe everything they are saying, but we need to listen. We need to act on what our young people tell us, because the future belongs to them and they have to listen to those who are older than they are, because experience is also a European value – they are often forgetting this obvious fact of life.

I love being in Malta, together with the President, with the Prime Minister, with the former Prime Minister, my good friend Lawrence. So as I was saying, I love to be in Malta, I have so many good friends here. And I love your positive energy and warm spirit. Thank you for having me here. And thank you Mr President for honouring me with this award today. I will cherish and wear it with pride and great admiration for this special country which is close to my heart.

Grazzi minn qalbi!