

Reasserting Europe's values

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Speaker

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I am pleased to be here with you today, as you have a crucial role in instilling new positive energy in the European discourse ahead of the European elections next May.

Reflection time is over. We have less than seven months to jump-start a new narrative, secure what we have achieved so far, and continue building the European future.

As you know, the EU has experienced many challenges much like our Member States. And we are here in Greece, a country that has faced many challenges in the past ten years.

First the financial crisis of 2008 and the program of fiscal retrenchment which led to the euro crisis and transformed the eurozone into a relationship between creditors and debtors – very far from what was the original project. This created a toxic relationship that poisoned the very core of European ideals—like the solidarity principle.

As a result, many people have grown to see the EU as the enemy that has deprived them of jobs and a secure and promising future. And of course, everywhere, the entrepreneurs of fears –populists, nationalists, xenophobic movements exploited the resentment and formed anti-European parties and movements.

Then came the refugee crisis of 2015. It was not the first one, but it was the most noticed one. At first, most people sympathised with the fate of thousands of refugees fleeing political repression or civil war, but then started fearing for their own social fabric and the inability of their governments that were meeting every month again and again without the capacity to deal with common and shared solutions. And they had the impression, our citizens, that the governments were incapable to govern this crisis.

A demographic panic spread across Europe and people started to believe in a fake narrative that their national cultures were under the threat of vanishing. The last narrative now is about the invasion of the Chinese culture that will occupy the European theatre.

In Germany, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) rapidly gained ground. The same happened in my own country Italy, where the political system has simply exploded and the repercussions have been even more disastrous with the anti-European Five Star Movement and League parties that now control 17 percent of the Parliament, divided on every topic except to gain power, control power and maintain power.

Similar shakeups are evident in many other countries in Europe; in Hungary, Poland, Romania. But, if it's true that authoritarians are on the rise everywhere and electorates are seduced by extremes, We should not to be destabilised by 'populistic' discourse. But, de facto, this discourse, either when it is not controlling the official government as in some cases is determining at large the public space and the public debate and the public agenda.

We live in a world that is increasingly diversified and we cannot go back to old national formats. Understanding and embracing change will allow Europe to move forward and shape the global order for the 21st century.

For the first time, for the very first time, since 1945, not only we are leading the first divorce ever in the European history with Brexit, but also we have an American President who doesn't see it as an American strategic interest to work hard to ensure a vibrant and unified Europe and a robust transatlantic relationship. For the very first time our traditional allies declared Europe is the best enemy of the United States.

Europe wants a fair and rules-based global economic development and wants to lead in rewriting the global rulebook in line with our own values, interests, and standards. New circumstances - new challenges - new rules.

That is common sense. We cannot go back to national formats like populists pretend we can. We just celebrated, in these days, the 100 anniversary of the First World War. We cannot forget that this war that would have been the last one, prepared the Second World War just a few years after with tremendous dictatorships around Europe – Nazism, Fascism, and also Stalinism.

These two wars last century have been the worst in the history of Europe. 60 millions of people dead, 70 million of people injured, destruction as never lived in this continent, and finally an iron curtain that has divided Europe for more than 60 years. We need to be aware that the capacity to change will make us more resilient, to the five fundamental transformations that Europe has to face, that our society has to face.

The economic and industrial transition, the ecological transition, the social transition and the transformation of our welfare state, the democratic and also the geopolitical transition. All this will allow us to make our values leading and still inspiring the world, because the world waits for the force of Europe.

If we stand still and go back to national formats, we risk being crashed by other economic giants. We are too often on the defensive today and we should become more offensive. Constantly inventing new solutions and always being ready to fight to preserve peace. Because peace is coming back as one of the most important points on the agenda for Europeans. Look at the everyday news on what is going on around Europe and at our borders.

To fight back we need first to grasp the causes of popular discontent and rebuild the moral foundations of our model of democracy—based on *liberté, égalité et fraternité* – the lost word of the French revolution.

24% of Europeans are today still touched by the risk of poverty and this is unacceptable in a continent that is still the richest part of the World. The effects of the crisis are still felt all around. Growth is unevenly shared and we are seeing increasing inequality between populations and between regions and parts of Europe, and signs of a generation worse off than their parents.

It's therefore urgent that the EU addresses the social malaise. This means among others delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights just proclaimed in Gothenburg one year ago, and the sustainable development goals by reducing poverty, creating quality jobs, preserving the environment and providing adequate social protection for our citizens. Only by listening to the concerns of the people and alleviate their hardships, the EU can reinforce its democratic legitimacy vis-à-vis its citizens.

But beyond listening and addressing the social malaise there is something much more important that we need to reassert loud and clear and defend with all our might: Who we are and what we stand for: Our Values--human rights, fundamental rights, equality, tolerance, rule of law, liberal democracy, freedoms, solidarity, protection of all minorities and diversity, open and inclusive society. This is the Article 2 of our Treaty. It is the foundation of what we decide to be.

After World War II, our founding fathers, who experienced first hand what it means when a society is deprived of values, fought to establish liberal democracy in Europe the rule of law, a strong civil society with independent media, the freedom of religion as well as expression and association.

Let me be clear: Fundamental values are for all citizens – the employers and employees, the young and the elderly, the jobless, the sick, the migrants, the minorities, etc. – who stand to gain the most from the defence of our values.

Europe's values must prevail against any erosive factors. It is because of our values that we have made Europe a better place, probably the best and most attractive place for the majority of its people and for millions of people outside Europe.

We have to be convinced that Europe is still the best place to live, to establish a family, to found a company, to work, to fail and be assisted, to be protected by social protection and have access to health and insurance. It is still the best place in the world.

This is why, I have decided to lead my presidency at the EESC under the slogan *rEUnaissance* – a powerful movement that keeps together the humanistic and classical cultures, with the positive approach of science as an instrument to shape the future of our society through the force of social and economic factors and the renewal of the level of governance. Because I am convinced that we need a *rEUnaissance* in Europe, we need to "dare" Europe, to reinforce this community of states and people, because there is no better solution than working together for a sustainable, prosperous Europe.

My focus is on sustainability, peace, and culture as I believe that under these headlines we can provide the right answers to people's current worries, while speaking their language free of any bureaucratic jargon, and designing a vision – a common project for all of us.

Allow me to conclude with a quote from Socrates: "The only good is knowledge, and the only evil is ignorance".

I hope that this seminar, so well prepared by our Vice-President Isabel and by all the team and the staff of the Communication, will find some responses as to how we can better react to people's concerns and better explain the added value of the European union and ultimately create a new narrative.

I want to contribute in what is my possibility as a President to this work and I myself have decided to launch today here in Athens a series of short videos to showcase the good of the European Union.

[I called it #!Europaebella – Europe is beautiful. I want to give you a glimpse of this, we will project the first one of these videos during the break.](#)

Thank you!

