



European Commission - Speech

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Speech by President Juncker at the European Policy Centre Thought Leadership Forum

Brussels, 24 October 2019

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Beste Herman,

We have known each other for many years, if not centuries. I think that some of the best encounters I had in my life were the ones with you. We were Ministers of Budget together. We were chairs of our political parties. We were Prime Ministers together. And when you were President of the European Council, myself having been appointed President of the Commission, our cooperation was instantly perfect. No surprise for the two of us, but a big surprise for others.

I started my mandate with you, traveling to Brisbane, Australia, for the G20. You may remember it was there, under the sun of Australia, that David Cameron informed us of his intention to hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. That is when I knew: No matter how good a campaigner he was, he would lose it. And I told him so. And he did not believe it, but it happened. I will always remember this moment.

Everything that Europe is today began as an idea. Born during the Second World War and born after the Second World War. We know that it is by debating that we test our thoughts and dare our dreams.

For over 20 years, the European Policy Centre has been at the centre of the debate on Europe. Your ideas, your thoughts, sometimes your dreams have helped shape the future of the European Union. I am happy to be invited here today to speak about my thoughts and experiences. And I am happy that I will deliver my last Brussels speech here – hopefully.

Herman,

Even though, admittedly, I would initially have preferred your job as President of the European Council, today I know better. But I will never forget the day when I entered your office, telling you that I had the intention to become a lead candidate of the EPP. You told me: 'O.K. As a European I like the idea, but as your good friend, you have to know that this is a tough job, a fulltime job.' I should have listened to you – it is more than a fulltime job.

It is important to remember where we came from. In 2014, Europe had been weakened by the most severe social and economic crisis since the Second World War. And Europeans' trust in the European Union was at an all-time low. Turnout in the European elections had done nothing but fall for decades and stagnated in 2014.

This is why I spoke of a 'Commission of the last chance' before being elected by European Parliament. But I believe we seized this chance, by getting the economy back on track and by making this a more social Union that works for all. I believe we are looking at a different European Union today, as you rightly said just a few minutes ago. Our economy is stronger and more resilient. Europeans are to some extent reconnecting with Europe, and we are slowly finding our place in the world.

When I say that our economy is stronger, it is not just because it has grown for seven consecutive years, 25 quarters, because more than 14 million jobs have been created in Europe during the mandate of this Commission or because the level of employment is at its highest level ever. But because I know that these figures do not fall from the sky.

They come in part from our efforts to make smart use of our resources, which we have done via the European Fund for Strategic Investments, initially known as 'Juncker Plan'. 'Juncker Plan' was the invention of those who thought that it would be a total failure. As it is a success now, it is called 'European Fund for Strategic Investments'. But it is exactly the same.

We have mobilised nearly EUR 440 billion in investment across the European Union, increased European GDP by 0.9% and added 1.1 million jobs. And we can be proud that more than 1 million small-sized companies are receiving financing that was not available to them before.

These results come also from the flexibility introduced in the Stability and Growth Pact, which has supported reforms and helped public finances recover. Controversial at the time, but the results speak for themselves.

More than half of the Eurozone governments were against these flexibility lines by which we have enriched the Stability and Growth Pact. They never approved it, but they followed the wisdom of the proposals of the Commission – for once. These good results come from the general atmosphere we have changed or we tried to change, and we succeeded to change in Europe.

But if I am saying that our economy is stronger, it is not just about the numbers. I was a Labour Minister for 17 years – the happiest period of my life. Although Labour Ministers are not very popular, but at least you have the impression to do something for those you are responsible for.

And I always believed that economic strength is nothing without social protection for people. With the support of the European Parliament and the Council, today we have the first ever Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed at the first European Social Summit in 20 years. I was President of the European Council back in 1997 and I was asked by France – or should I say by Jospin – to organise an employment summit. The Conclusions of the European Council at that time were that we should have a job summit every year. It took 20 years to have the second one. But for my whole life, I never believed in second class workers. Today, this is enshrined in European law, with a simple principle: the same wage for the same work in the same place.

I could go on, but my point is that I can say our economy is strong, because our social values – they too – are strong.

While strengthening our economy, we have also strengthened our resilience. This I can tell you, because we have been tried and tested, again and again. From Greece to migration to Brexit – the three most significant crises I had to face – it has not been an easy ride. But each time we have shown solidarity when it counted the most, unity when disunity threatened to prevail, and true European resilience.

When people ask me – and this happens very often these weeks – what the Commission's biggest achievement was, it is always Greece. It deserves a book in itself. That is why I have to write a book, at least two books. There are many who take credit for this and some without merit.

I would like to take a little of the merit at least. Because when I was, as a President of the Commission, dealing with the Greek crisis, numerous were the Prime Ministers and the Finance Ministers calling me and who said: 'Jean-Claude, this is not your job. This is the job of the Member States.' But I read in the Treaty – I am amongst those who know the Treaty – and in the Treaty, there is one provision on the Commission, saying that the Commission is in charge of the general interest of the European Union. Accepting that one country would be ejected from the euro area would not have been in the general interest of the European Union. So I did what I was able to do to keep Greece as a member of the euro area. And our efforts – they were numerous – in fact triggered an estimated 2% GDP increase in that country, whereas in the years before they were losing 5% – all in all 25% of GDP.

And I insisted, because this was not done before, that the programme went through a social impact assessment and contained a strong social dimension. I have to say here that this was not the idea of the IMF, it was our idea. By the way, I never understood why the IMF was so deeply involved in the solution of the Greek problem we had to face. If California has a problem, they are not going to the IMF, they are going to Washington, although the IMF is also located in Washington. Europe should have been able to deal with the Greek crisis with its own instruments and its own means, but all the instruments were not there. During Herman's time, many instruments were added to the instrumentarium we had and that was a very weak one. After what he did, it has become far stronger than it was before.

This August, we marked the one-year anniversary of Greece successfully concluding the programme and the efforts taken are delivering results. Unemployment in Greece is down, more than 230,000 new jobs have been created since the start of the Stability Support Programme in 2015. Economic growth has rebounded to 2% as an average and is set to remain at that very level. Public finances have returned to a sustainable path. But the country must of course continue to focus on fully addressing the social and economic consequences of the crisis, but we are a far cry from 2015. Who would have thought it in 2014, that Greece would be in such a better situation today than it was before?

But the most divisive of the crises is by far migration. I remember standing in the European Parliament Plenary in April 2015 making a plea for saving lives at sea and opening up legal paths for migration. I got – which is not so normal in the European Parliament – a standing ovation. I am now getting standing ovations everywhere, but at that time, it was less obvious. And I remember saying to the Parliamentarians: 'You applaud me now, but will you still applaud me six months from now?' The answer, as we know, was no. We have to be honest. We did not achieve all we wanted to on migration,

but the advances we did make remain important nevertheless.

My approach to migration has always been European to the core. This has never been and will never be a challenge that any single Member State can handle alone. For me, making a success of the Union's migration policy has been about reinforcing this and with policies to address all angles. From border management to helping those who really need Europe's protection and a safe place for their families, to working with our international partners on the ground and addressing the root causes that push people to leave their homes in the first place.

More was achieved in this very context than is often acknowledged. In the last years, we have offered a safe haven to more refugees than Australia, Canada and the U.S. combined – three times more. Europe did not become a fortress during these years. We were the place, accepting those who have the problems they have. An estimated 1.6 million refugees currently benefit from our support to Turkey. 8 million EU-funded primary health care consultations have been delivered and some 600,000 Syrian refugee children now have access to education thanks to the European support.

Our borders are more secure with the new European Border and Coast Guard we have put into place. And I was proposing, months ago, to increase the number of the coastguards to 10,000 officers in 2020. Everyone is inviting the Commission, the European Union, to increase the protection of the external borders. The Commission has proposed 10,000 guards, the Council was postponing this to the year 2027. It is easy to ask the Commission to do something. It is less easy to follow the Commission when the Commission is making sound proposals.

Our Emergency Trust Fund for Africa has proven to be an effective tool to address some of the root causes of irregular migration. But I am warning against this attitude – you can visit and revisit in Europe – our relations with Africa are not migration-dominated. Our relations with Africa have to be transformed, because we have to move from a policy of charity to a policy of equal partnership. If you are talking to the Africans, do not mention migration every minute. This is against the dignity of the African people and I try to avoid this error.

But the third crisis we faced during this mandate was Brexit. As you are reading about it in the press every day, I will be short. I have spent too much time with Brexit. It is enough now. It could have brought the house down, acted as a catalyst for others, and split Europe forever. But it did not. Unity has prevailed. And one should not underestimate how many conversations and encouragements this took me and others, and Michel Barnier mainly, to make this thing happen – unity of the 27. But I have to admit that it has pained me to spend so much of this mandate having to deconstruct – when all I have ever wanted to do is move the European Union forward, not backwards. But to the surprise of many, we have not fallen apart – quite the opposite.

In short, when put to the test as we have been over the last five years, the resilience and strength of the Union has shone through, and in the face of the greatest challenges we have ever met in recent decades.

I am not a fan of polls – because I do not believe them, the opinion polls in Luxembourg were always, when it came to my popularity, at 95%, so they must have been wrong. But the latest data shows that today, trust in the European Union is at its highest level in 10 years. In the last year alone, we have seen the number of people who have a positive image of the European Union increase in no less than 20 EU Member States. Even, according to some opinion polls, in the United Kingdom. They came too late, but nevertheless, the European Union has never been as popular as it is for the time being in the UK.

People say they feel more European. There is more support for the Economic and Monetary Union and the single currency than ever before, and a majority of Europeans now believe their voice – their individual voice – counts in the European Union.

Beyond this polling data, which you can choose to trust or not – I am rather pessimistic when it comes to a scientific analysis of opinion polls –, there is the stark fact that in the European elections this year, we saw the highest turnout in 20 years and a sharp decline in the number of parties advocating to take their countries out of the euro area or out of the European Union.

I believe there is a lot we have done to deliver for Europeans. I do not want to swim in this pleasant channel of auto-satisfaction. But I think we have done a lot to deliver for Europeans.

For example, we have put a great deal of effort into delivering more to for young Europeans, helping them to travel, to study, to find work when unemployed and give back to society through the new European Solidarity Corps. Between the start of this Commission and 2020, 4 million people are expected to benefit from the Erasmus programme, which is one of the biggest successes ever of the European Union. Around 50,000 young Europeans have already taken part in our new DiscoverEU programme, many of whom have been able to travel to another European city for the first time. And since we announced – which is largely underestimated – a new European Solidarity Corps, over

172,000 young people have registered their interest to take part, and more than 30,000 are already active, volunteering, training and running their own solidarity projects all over Europe. That is Europe at its best!

We are listening more to what people want. When I took this job, I said to every single member of the College: I do not want you to stay in Brussels all the time. Some of them are exaggerating, because they are never in Brussels, but it is not good for the Commissioners to be imprisoned in the Berlaymont. I said to them: Travel, explain, have dialogues with citizens and with Parliaments. We have embarked on the first constant dialogue with European citizens. 1,815 Citizens' Dialogues have taken place in 650 cities. Members of the Commission were visiting more than 900 national and regional Parliaments after the publication of the so-called 'White Paper on the Future of Europe' in March 2017.

Their ideas – those of our citizens –, their engagement, their expectations have guided us through the mandate. For instance, we adopted the first ever EU-wide Strategy on Plastics and we set up a dedicated European Border and Coast Guard, both themes that citizens have mentioned in almost every single Citizens' Dialogue.

I also knew that if Europeans were to see the worth of Europe once more, we needed to rethink where we could add the most value for our citizens. So we cut the amount of legislation from around 100 major initiatives in 2014, to 23 in 2015 and just 15 in 2019. This amounts to 83% fewer legislative initiatives over the last five years compared to before and has allowed us to stay focused on the 10 clear priorities I have mentioned at the beginning of my mandate.

Lastly, although I am not the last to do so, I campaigned for my job as President of the Commission. I presented my ideas to European citizens in 33 cities in 18 countries in 54 days. Because I was appointed by the EPP when the campaign was over, so I had to speed up the whole process. What I am sad about is that the European Commission, like other European institutions, is heavily criticised for being non-democratic, over-bureaucratic. We are dealt with by some – not only in Britain – as a group of putschists. I have to say here: I have been elected 11 times in my life, 7 times at national and 4 times at European level. So I do not feel like a putschist. I am an elected guy.

And I am not accepting that the Commission is always described as an anonymous corps of bureaucrats, technocrats, blind and stubborn people – we are not. I took four former Prime Ministers into my Commission and 13 former Ministers, all the others having been elected to the European Parliament or the national Parliament. Apart from the British Commissioner, everyone in my Commission has been elected. And the British Commissioners – they were excellent, Lord Hill and Julian King. Now, when Julian King appeared at the College for the first time, I said: 'Progress cannot be stopped in Britain. We had a Lord, now we have a King.' And he behaved like a 'Grandseigneur', because he was doing whatever he was asked to do and whatever he was able to do.

I see a different Union today. I think that our citizens see a different European Union today, too. But I also know that we are seen by others as a different Union today.

I can tell you that this was the most clear for me during this mandate when I was standing in the Oval Office last year on 25 July, looking at Europe from the outside in. I would be happy to credit my excellent negotiating skills alone for why I was able to avoid a trade war and reach an understanding with President Trump. But the reality is that I was speaking from a position of strength, because I was speaking with the force of 28 Member States behind me and with an exclusive EU competence – that of the Commission – in trade matters.

During these negotiations with Donald Trump, from time to time, he had to interrupt the session. And then he called me back to the Oval Office, and then he said: 'Listen Jean-Claude, I do not want a deal with the European Union. I would like to have a deal with you personally.' Then I said: 'No, I am Europe. L'Etat, c'est moi !' For a Luxembourger, to sit in the Oval Office, telling the President of the United States that I have to be taken seriously, c'est du jamais vu !

Today, the EU is clearly the world's trade superpower. We have agreements with 72 countries around the world, covering 40% of the global GDP. But more important than that is that in the last two years, we have ushered in a new generation of trade agreements with some of the world's biggest economies. Canada, we were negotiating with for 20 years; Japan, we were negotiating with for decades. These agreements, although heavily criticised in our public opinions, they reflect our values – from the transparent way in which they were negotiated, to the in-built protection of environmental and labour standards. This is trade done Europe's way.

In many other areas, Europe has become a major player on the international stage, and a positive force for change. Our partners know that they can count on us to defend the multilateral rules-based global order. And around the world, the European Union is seen as a beacon of hope, a guardian of peace and a source of stability. That is the reason why I am unhappy about the result of the recent

European Council when it comes to North Macedonia and Albania. We have promised to both that we would deliver – we did not. And if the European Union wants to be respected worldwide, we have to keep our promises – internal promises and promises to other parts of the world.

We are respected, because the European Union is providing over half of the world's development and humanitarian aid. It is the European Union which is building new partnerships based on investments and on stronger commercial and economic ties, with our strategic partners, such as our twin continent Africa.

I have tried to change our relations to with Africa, by proposing a new alliance with Africa, because I think that Africa matters in the future. They will be more numerous, they will be – rightly so – more demanding and we have to be prepared to deal with them in the best way possible.

And when it comes to our defence, we are finally acting together. I remain convinced that we have to reinforce European security and defence. Which is why starting in 2014, I called for a Permanent Structured Cooperation in defence matters. The Sleeping Beauty of the Lisbon Treaty has now been woken from her slumber. It is why we created a European Defence Fund. It is why Donald Tusk and I worked to create a real culture of cooperation between the European Union and NATO.

And there are good reasons for working together in a better way when it comes to defence. In Europe, we have 178 types of weapons, in the U.S. 30. In Europe, we have 17 types of tanks, in the U.S. one. We are spending half of the American budget when it comes to defence, so we should be efficient at 50% as the U.S.. We are only 15% as efficient. So we have to reconsider this whole matter in a way that we have to work together in a better way. If we were working together in a better way, we could make the economy EUR 25-100 billion per day. Let us do it instead of giving lessons to others.

We have to become more effective internationally. I have called this 'Weltpolitikfähigkeit' in German. If we are sticking to the rule of unanimity in all the matters related to foreign affairs, we are lost. I am strongly defending the view that also in foreign policy, we have to decide – in some areas at least – by qualified majority. It is impossible to explain to the rest of the world that we cannot give our judgement, our assessment in the United Nations Human Rights Committee in Geneva, because one Member State is considering that in China everything is perfect. So we have to make up our minds when it comes to the decision-making process in foreign affairs.

So Herman,

I am thanking you for being here today, and to for listening to me.

These were five years to get Europe back on track. From the economy to our place in the world and via every crisis along the way. We had to prove our worth to people or we would have lost our citizens forever.

I would not like to say that we are out of the woods, because I do not like auto-satisfaction, although I am tempted to be in the middle of auto-satisfaction these days.

Brexit is a shame and is the most difficult problem we have ever had to face. I do not think that Brexit is in the interest of the Britain, nor in the interest of the European Union. All of us – we will pay the price.

As far as Brexit is concerned and as far as the other problems I was mentioning are concerned, and I could not mention all the problems we had to face – I did my best. It has been the honour of my life to serve the European Union.

Obrigado, thank you, dankeschön, merci, bedankt!

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