



Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the European coordinated response to the COVID-19 outbreak

Brussels, 26 March 2020

Monsieur le Président,

Chers Mesdames et Messieurs les députés,

Je tiens tout d'abord à remercier tous ceux qui ont rendu possible cette séance extraordinaire dans ces conditions tout aussi extraordinaires. Il est difficile de réaliser à quel point et de quelle façon le monde a changé depuis notre dernier rendez-vous. En un clin d'œil, un virus qui apparaît à l'autre bout du monde devient une pandémie tueuse aux conséquences tragiques, ici aussi en Europe.

D'un jour à l'autre, nos modes de vie ont changé. Nos rues se sont vidées. Nos portes se sont fermées. Et nous sommes passés de la routine quotidienne au combat de notre vie. Pendant ce temps, nous avons vu la fragilité de la vie mise à nu sous nos yeux. Et nous avons vu une tragédie au cœur de l'Europe d'une ampleur inimaginable il y a quelques semaines encore. Je suis de tout cœur avec toutes les victimes et tous leurs proches. Et nos pensées et nos meilleurs vœux vont à ceux qui luttent pour leur vie en ce moment-ci, ou qui sont malades chez eux.

Mais si le virus frappe fort, les citoyens européens sont aussi puissants. Je tiens à rendre hommage aux hommes et aux femmes qui mènent ce combat. Je pense aux infirmières, aux médecins et aux aides-soignants – en Italie, en Espagne, dans toute l'Europe – qui ont couru vers le danger sans se poser la moindre question. Ces héros qui mettent tout en jeu, jour après jour, pour sauver nos parents, pour sauver nos grands-parents, les amis et les collègues, les voisins et les étrangers. L'Europe vous doit tous une dette de gratitude. Aux remplisseurs de rayons et aux ramasseurs de poubelles. Aux assistants funéraires et aux assistants d'éducation. Aux camionneurs et aux nettoyeurs. Aux ouvriers et aux boulangers. À tous ceux qui aident notre monde à tourner. L'Europe vous doit tous une dette de gratitude.

But what is unique about this fight is that every single one of us has a role to play. Every single one of us can help repay that debt. By keeping our distance we can slow down the spread of the virus. The numbers in the last few days have shown that we can bend the trend – but only if we all do our share. Yes, it is painful to stay away from our family – especially when we are worried about their physical and their mental health. And yes, it is painful for those for whom home is not a happy or a safe place to be. It is painful for those who have plans put on hold or things they worked so hard for cast into doubt. This is why I am convinced that while we may be sitting further apart than usual, we must work closer together than ever before.

We must look out for each other, we must pull each other through this. Because if there is one thing that is more contagious than this virus, it is love and compassion. And in the face of adversity, the people of Europe are showing how strong that can be. Small acts of kindness, compassion, solidarity are helping to spread hope through all Europe: from volunteering to balcony singing. From sending

postcards to the lonely, to shopping for the elderly. From hotels offering their beds for free, to restaurants donating their food. From luxury perfumers and vodka producers making sanitising gel, to car makers and fashion houses producing masks. This is the example that the European Union must follow. By each doing our little bit, we can truly help each other a lot.

And our role as Europe's institutions, policy makers and leaders is to show that same trust, that same unity and that same leadership. We all share this responsibility. None of us can do it alone and certainly no Member State can handle this crisis on their own. Because in this crisis, and in our Union more generally, it is only by helping each other that we can help ourselves.

But the story from the last few weeks is partly a painful one to tell. When Europe really needed to be there for each other, too many initially looked out for themselves. When Europe really needed an 'all for one' spirit, too many initially gave an 'only for me' response. And when Europe really needed to prove that this is not only a 'fair weather Union', too many initially refused to share their umbrella. But it was not long before some felt the consequences of their own uncoordinated action. This is why over the last few weeks we took exceptional and extraordinary measures to coordinate and enable the action that is needed.

Since then, things are improving and Member States are starting to help each other – to help themselves. Europe is now really stepping up. But the people of Europe are watching what happens next. And we all know what is at stake. What we do now matters – for today as well as for the future.

Honourable Members,

The outbreak of the Coronavirus is first and foremost a public health emergency. And we will stop at nothing to save lives. To do that, we are lucky to have and to be able to rely on the best health care professionals in the world. From Milan to Madrid and beyond, they are producing miracles every single day. But as we have seen – both there and elsewhere – the scale of the outbreak is stretching them to the breaking point. They urgently need the equipment, the right equipment, they need the right amount of it, and they need it right now. But instead of that, what we saw was crucial equipment stuck in bottlenecks or at borders for days.

And this is why we had to take matters into our own hands as far as we could to release these blockades. This is why we are creating the first ever European stockpile of medical equipment, such as ventilators, masks and lab supplies. The Commission will finance 90% of this stockpile through RescEU. This is why we launched several joint procurements with Member States for testing kits, ventilators and protective equipment. 25 Member States joined the latter.

And there is good news: since Tuesday, we know that their demands for masks, gloves, goggles, face-shields can be matched by the producers. The first deliveries should start in the coming weeks. And because knowledge saves lives in a pandemic, we set up a European team of scientists, experts to help us come up with coordinated measures that we all can follow. I personally chair these discussions twice a week. Doing so has only deepened my conviction that we will need to draw on all that makes us strong to get through this together and then to get back on our feet again.

And we have no stronger asset for this than our unique Single Market. A successful European response can only be coordinated if our Internal Market and our Schengen area work the way it should. A crisis without borders cannot be resolved by putting barriers between us. And yet, this is exactly the first reflex that many European countries had. This simply makes no sense. Because there is not one single Member State that can meet its own needs when it comes to vital medical supplies and equipment. Not one.

The free movement of goods and services is therefore our strongest, and frankly, our only asset to

ensure supplies can go where they are needed most. It makes no sense that some countries unilaterally decided to stop exports to others in the Internal Market. And this is why the Commission intervened when a number of countries blocked exports of protective equipment to Italy. It is why we issued guidelines for border measures to protect health and keep goods and essential services available. It is why we are calling for priority 'green lanes' for transport of goods. These will ensure that crossing the border takes no more than 15 minutes. And they will help ensure that goods and supplies can go where they are needed and we all can avoid shortages.

It pains me that we had to do this, but our coordinated approach is now bearing fruit. The Internal Market is already functioning better. And we all welcome the news that hospitals in Saxony took patients from Lombardy, while others from the 'Grand Est' in France are now being treated in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. This only goes to prove that it is only by helping each other that we can help ourselves.

Honourable Members,

The whole set of measures that we have taken reflects the unprecedented situation we are all in. But as I said earlier, the people of Europe are watching what happens next. And they of course want us to do everything we can to save as many lives as we can. But they are also thinking about the day after. They are thinking about what job they will have to go back to, what will happen to their business and to their employers. What will happen to their savings and their mortgage? They will worry about their parents, their neighbour, their local community. They will know that their governments had to make difficult decisions to save lives – yes.

But they will also remember who was there for them – and who was not. And they will remember those that acted – and those who did not. And they will remember the decisions that we take today – or those we will not. The point is that sometime soon there will be a day after. And our job is to make sure that on that day – and on all that follow it – the European Union is there for those that need it. What we do now really matters.

And this is why we launched the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative to help direct EUR 37 billion mitigate the impact of the crisis, to save lives, jobs and businesses. This is why we adopted the most flexible ever temporary rules on state aid to enable Member States to give a lifeline to their businesses. The first cases were approved in record time, within a matter of hours.

And this is why, for the first time in our history, we have activated the general escape clause in the Stability and Growth Pact. That means that Member States can use all the firepower they have to support those in work or those out of work, to support businesses small and big, and to support people through these tough times.

Meine Damen und Herren Abgeordnete,

Das ist das Europa, an das sich die Menschen am Tag danach erinnern sollen. Ein Europa, das im Schnelldurchlauf arbeitet, wenn es sich so anfühlt, als hätte die ganze Welt auf Pause gedrückt. Ein Europa, das für seine Menschen und Mitgliedstaaten da ist, wenn sie es dringend brauchen. Ein Europa, das Einfühlungsvermögen hat und Mitgefühl über alles andere stellt.

Ein Europa, das in Zeiten der Not widerstandsfähig und selbstlos zugleich ist. Das ist das Europa, das ich mir wünsche. Es ist exakt jenes Europa, von dem unsere Gründungsväter und Gründungsmütter in der Asche des Zweiten Weltkriegs träumten. Als sie diese Union aus Menschen und Nationen schufen, stand ihnen schmerzlich vor Augen, wohin Selbstsucht und übertrieben nationales Denken führen

können. Es ging ihnen darum, ein Bündnis zu schmieden, in dem aus gegenseitigem Vertrauen gemeinsame Stärke wächst. Und es war ihr großer Gedanke, aus dem binnen Jahrzehnten eine einzigartige Gemeinschaft in Freiheit und Frieden entstand – unsere Europäische Union.

Und heute, angesichts eines unsichtbaren Feindes, werden diese Grundwerte unserer Union auf die Probe gestellt. Wir müssen uns alle aufeinander verlassen können. Wir müssen uns wieder alle gegenseitig durch die harten Zeiten helfen. Im Augenblick ist es unsere allererste Pflicht und Priorität, das Leben und die Existenzgrundlagen der Europäerinnen und Europäer zu retten. Aber der Tag wird kommen, und ich hoffe in nicht allzu ferner Zukunft, an dem wir nach vorne blicken und gemeinsam den Aufschwung gestalten müssen.

Und dann werden wir Lehren ziehen und entscheiden müssen, was für eine Europäische Union wir künftig wollen. Und wenn wir das tun, dann sollten wir uns nicht auf die falsche Debatte einlassen, ob wir mehr oder ob wir weniger Europa brauchen. Wir sollten uns lieber darauf konzentrieren, wie wir diesen Sturm nutzen können, um sicherzustellen, dass wir dem nächsten besser standhalten können.

Denn der Wunsch nach einer widerstandsfähigen und einer lebenswerten Heimat Europa eint uns doch alle: ob Nord oder Süd, oder Ost oder West. Und seien wir uns bewusst: Die Entscheidungen, die wir heute treffen, die werden lange in Erinnerung bleiben. Und sie werden das Fundament unserer Europäischen Union von morgen prägen.

Wir stehen an einer Weggabel: Wird uns dieses Virus endgültig in Arm und Reich spalten? In die Wohlhabenden und die Habenichtse? Oder werden wir ein starker Kontinent bleiben, ein ernstzunehmender Akteur auf dieser Welt? Können wir aus dieser Lage vielleicht sogar stärker und besser herauskommen? Können wir unsere Gemeinschaften angesichts der Krise näher zusammenrücken lassen? Können unsere Demokratien an Ansehen gewinnen?

Und wenn man sich die vielen Akte der Zuwendung, der Freundlichkeit und des menschlichen Anstands in ganz Europa anschaut, dann sieht man, dass wir allen Grund haben, optimistisch in die Zukunft zu schauen. Unser Europa hat alles in der Hand, was nötig ist, und wir sind bereit, alles zu tun, was nötig ist, um diese Krise zu meistern.

Verehrte Abgeordnete,

In den letzten Tagen haben viele von Ihnen das Jean-Monnet-Zitat über das Schmieden Europas in Zeiten der Krise verwendet. Und das gilt auch heute. Aber es gibt ein Zitat von einem anderen Gründungsvater, das meiner Meinung nach ebenfalls zusammenfasst, wo wir heute stehen. Konrad Adenauer sagte: „Geschichte ist auch die Summe der Dinge, die man hätte vermeiden können.“ Liebe Freundinnen und Freunde, die Geschichte schaut auf uns. Lassen Sie uns gemeinsam das Richtige tun – mit einem großen Herzen, und nicht mit 27 kleinen.

Lang lebe Europa! Vive l'Europe! Long live Europe!