

Speech
by Olaf Scholz,
Chancellor of the Federal Republic of
Germany
and Member of the German Bundestag,

at the Charles University
in Prague

“Europe is our future”

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Rector Professor Králíčková,
Honoured Prorectors and faculty members,
Minister Bek,
Excellencies,
Esteemed students,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for your kind invitation!

It's a great honour for me to be here at this historic place – in the presence of the founder of this venerable institution, as it were, to talk to you about the future. About our future, which I believe can be summarised in a single word: Europe.

And there's probably no better place to do this than here in the city of Prague, than at this university with its almost 700-year history.

“Ad fontes”, which means to the sources – that was the call of the great humanists of the European Renaissance. Those who make their way to the sources of Europe invariably come here – to this city whose legacy and character are more European than almost any other city on our continent.

This is instantly apparent to each and every American or Chinese tourist strolling across the Charles Bridge up to the Castle. That's why they come here. Because, amidst its medieval castles and bridges, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish places of worship and cemeteries, Gothic cathedrals and Art Nouveau palaces, high-rise buildings made of glass and quaint streets with their half-timbered houses and the hotchpotch of languages spoken in the Old Town, they discover the essence of Europe: the greatest possible diversity in a very cramped space.

If Prague is therefore Europe in miniature, then the Charles University is like a chronicler of our European history, which is so rich in light and shadow. I couldn't say whether its founder, Emperor Charles IV, thought of himself as a European. His biography suggests that this was the case. Born with the old Bohemian first name

“Václav“, educated in Bologna and Paris, the son of a ruler from the House of Luxembourg and a Habsburg, German Emperor, King of Bohemia and Italy. So the fact that Bohemians, Poles, Bavarians and Saxons completed their studium generale at “his” university as a matter of course alongside students from France, Italy and England only seems logical.

But because this university is in Europe, it also had to endure the low points of European history: religious fervour, division along linguistic and cultural borders and ideological streamlining during the dictatorships of the 20th century.

It was the Germans who wrote the darkest chapter of this history: the closure of the university by the National Socialist occupiers, the shooting of protesting students and the abduction to German concentration camps of thousands of members of the university, who were subsequently murdered there.

These crimes fill us Germans with pain and shame to this day. Giving expression to this fact is another reason why I’m here today.

Especially since we often forget that the lack of freedom, suffering and dictatorship did not end for many citizens in Central Europe with the German occupation and the destruction of the Second World War. One of the many great intellectuals that this university produced reminded us of this back in the time of the Cold War.

In 1983, Milan Kundera described the “Tragedy of Central Europe”, namely how, after the Second World War, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Balts, Hungarians, Romanians, Bulgarians and Jugoslavs “woke up to discover that they were now in the East” – that they had “vanished from the map of the West”.

We’re also getting to grips with this legacy – especially those of us who were on the Western side of the Iron Curtain. Not only because this legacy is part of European history and therefore our common history as Europeans, but also because the experience of citizens of Central and Eastern Europe – the feeling of being forgotten

and abandoned behind an iron curtain – continues to cast a shadow to this day. Incidentally, also in the debates about our future, about Europe.

Right now, we're asking ourselves once again where the dividing line will run between this free Europe and a neo-imperialist autocracy in the future. I talked about a watershed following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February.

Putin's Russia wants to redraw boundaries with violence – something that we in Europe never wanted to experience again. The brutal attack on Ukraine is therefore also an attack on Europe's security order.

We are standing up to this attack with all due resolve. We need our own strength for this – as individual countries, in the alliance with our transatlantic partners, but also as the European Union.

This united Europe was born as a peace project within Europe. Its objective was to ensure that war never broke out again between its member states. Today, it is up to us to continue to develop this promise of peace – by enabling the European Union to safeguard its security, its independence and its stability also in the face of challenges from without.

That is Europe's new peace mission, ladies and gentlemen! That is what probably most members of the public expect of Europe – in the west and the east of our continent alike.

It is therefore a stroke of good fortune that the Presidency of the Council of the European Union is currently being held by the Czech Republic, which has long since acknowledged the importance of this mission – and is steering Europe in the right direction.

Czechia has Germany's full support for this. And I'm looking forward to working together with Prime Minister Fiala to find the right European answers to this watershed.

The first of these answers is that we aren't taking Russia's attack on peace in Europe lying down! We will not stand idly by and watch women, men and children being killed or free countries being rubbed off the map and disappearing behind walls or iron curtains. We don't want to go back to the 19th or 20th century with their wars of occupation and totalitarian excesses.

Our Europe is united in peace and freedom and is open to all European nations who share our values. Above all, however, it is an active rejection of imperialism and autocracy.

The currency of the European Union is not supremacy or subordination, but rather the acknowledgement of diversity, a level playing field between all of its members, as well as plurality and the balancing of different interests.

It is precisely this united Europe that is such anathema to Putin. Because it doesn't fit into his worldview, in which smaller countries are forced to submit to a handful of major European powers.

It is all the more important that we defend our idea of Europe together.

This is why we're supporting Ukraine as it is under attack: economically, financially and politically, with humanitarian assistance and also militarily – Germany has undergone a fundamental change of heart on this issue in recent months.

We will keep up this support, reliably and, above all, for as long as it takes!

This also goes for the reconstruction of the destroyed country, which will be a massive undertaking that will take generations to accomplish. This requires international coordination and an intelligent, dependable strategy. This will be the focus at an expert conference that Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and I have invited Ukraine and its partners from all around the world to attend in Berlin on 25 October.

In the coming weeks and months, we will, moreover, be sending Ukraine new, state-of-the-art weapons – such as air defence and radar systems and reconnaissance drones. Our most recent package of arms deliveries alone is worth 600 million euro. Our objective are modern Ukrainian armed forces that are able to defend their country on a permanent basis.

However, we mustn't content ourselves with supplying Kyiv with equipment that we ourselves can do without at the moment. We need greater planning and coordination also here.

Together with the Netherlands, we have therefore launched an initiative seeking to achieve a long-term and reliable division of labour between all partners of Ukraine. I can, for example, imagine that Germany will assume special responsibility in terms of building up Ukraine's artillery and air defence capacities. We shouldn't waste time in reaching agreement on such a system of coordinated support, thus underscoring our commitment to a free and independent Ukraine in the long term.

Like we did at the European Council in June when we joined hands and said "yes". Yes, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and, down the line, also Georgia and, of course, the six countries of the Western Balkans belong to the free and democratic part of Europe. Their EU accession is in our interest.

I could explain this in demographic or economic terms or, in keeping with Milan Kundera, from a cultural, ethical or moral perspective. All of these reasons are valid.

But what is clearer than ever today is the geopolitical dimension of this decision. Realpolitik in the 21st century does not mean putting values on the back burner or sacrificing partners on the altar of lazy compromises. Realpolitik must mean involving friends and partners with shared values and supporting them in order to be strong in global competition through cooperation.

This is, by the way, also my understanding of Emmanuel Macron's proposal for a European Political Community. It goes without saying that we have the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the OECD, the Eastern Partnership, the European Economic Area and NATO. All of these are important forums in which we Europeans are working together closely also beyond the borders of the EU.

What is lacking, however, is a regular exchange at the political level – a forum in which we Heads of State and Government of the EU and our European partners meet once or twice each year to discuss the key issues that affect our continent as a whole, such as security, energy, the climate and connectivity.

Such a grouping – and it's very important to me to emphasise this – is not an alternative to the upcoming process of EU enlargement. After all, we have given our accession candidates our word – and, in the case of the countries of the Western Balkans, that was almost 20 years ago. And these words must be followed by deeds at long last!

Many people have rightly called for a stronger, more sovereign and geopolitical European Union in recent years, for a Union that is aware of its place in the history and geography of this continent and acts strongly and cohesively around the world.

The historic decisions taken in the past months have brought us closer to this goal.

- We have imposed far-reaching sanctions on Putin's Russia with unprecedented resolve and speed.
- Circumventing the debates that were typical of the past, we have taken in millions of women, men and children from Ukraine seeking refuge here with us. The Czech Republic and other countries of Central Europe in particular have demonstrated their big heart and great solidarity. You have my very greatest respect for this!

- And we have breathed new life into the word “solidarity” in other areas. We’re working more closely together in the area of the energy supply. Just a few weeks ago, we adopted European reduction targets for gas consumption. Both of these things are essential with a view to the coming winter. And Germany in particular is most grateful for this solidarity.

You are all aware of the resolve with which Germany is currently working to reduce its dependence on fuel supplies from Russia. We’re building up alternative capacities for importing liquid natural gas and crude oil. And we’re doing this in a spirit of solidarity – also by thinking of the needs of land-locked countries such as the Czech Republic.

This is the promise that I made to Prime Minister Fiala during his visit to Berlin in May. And we will doubtlessly underscore this solidarity once again at our meeting today.

After all, the pressure of change on us Europeans is set to increase, irrespective of Russia’s war and its impacts. In a world that is home to eight and perhaps ten billion people in the future, each and every one of our European nation states is, taken by itself, much too small to stand up for its interests and values alone.

A European Union acting in concert is therefore all the more important to us.

And strong partners, first and foremost the United States, are all the more important, too. The fact that a card-carrying transatlanticist in the guise of President Biden is in the White House these days is a blessing for us all. We have witnessed the indispensable value of the transatlantic partnership in the past months. NATO stands more united today than ever before; we’re reaching decisions standing shoulder to shoulder in the transatlantic alliance.

But for all that President Biden in particular has done for our partnership, we know at the same time that Washington’s gaze is also increasingly focused on competition

with China and on the Asia-Pacific region. This will also be the case for future US Governments – perhaps even more so.

In a multipolar world – and that is what the world of the 21st century is – it is therefore not enough to content ourselves with tending to pre-existing partnerships, as valuable as they are. We will invest in new partnerships – in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Political and economic diversification is, incidentally, also part of the answer to the question as to how we deal with the superpower China and the triad of “partner, competitor and rival”. The other part of this answer is that we must bring the clout of our united Europe much more strongly to bear.

Together, we stand the very best chance of helping to form and shape the 21st century in our own, European, vein – as a European Union of 27, 30 or 36 countries, which will then have over 500 million free citizens enjoying equal rights, with the biggest internal market in the world, with leading research institutes and innovative companies, with stable democracies, with social welfare and a public infrastructure that is without parallel around the world.

That is the ambition that I associate with a geopolitical Europe.

The experience of past months shows in fact that blockades can be overcome. European rules can be changed – in very short order, if need be. And even the European Treaties aren't set in stone. If, together, we come to the conclusion that the Treaties need to be amended so that Europe makes progress, then we should do that.

Abstract discussions about this won't help us, however. Rather it's important that we take a look at what must be changed and then decide in concrete terms how to proceed. “Form follows function” – this motto of modern architecture must also be taken to heart in European policy as a matter of urgency.

It is only natural to my mind that Germany must deliver proposals to this end and also move with the times itself.

So that's one reason why I'm here, in the capital of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union – to present to you and our friends in Europe some of my ideas for the future of our Union. These are ideas, mind you, offers, food for thought – not ready-made German solutions.

I believe that Germany's responsibility for Europe lies in working on solutions together with our neighbours and then reaching decisions together. I do not want an EU of exclusive clubs or departments. What I do want is an EU with members enjoying equal rights. And I wish to add quite clearly that the fact that the EU is continuing to grow in an eastward direction is a win-win situation for everyone!

Germany, as a country at the heart of the continent, will do everything in its power to bring together East and West, North and South in Europe.

With this in mind, I would like to share the following four thoughts with you.

Firstly, I'm committed to the enlargement of the European Union – to include the countries of the Western Balkans. And Ukraine. And Moldova and, down the line, also Georgia!

An EU with 30 or 36 member states will look different than today's Union, however. That goes without saying. The centre of Europe is moving eastwards, we could say, taking a leaf out of historian Karl Schlögel's book.

In this expanded Union, the differences between the member states will grow as far as political interests, economic clout and social security systems are concerned. Ukraine isn't Luxembourg, and Portugal views the challenges of the world differently than North Macedonia.

First and foremost, the candidate countries are required to fulfil the criteria for accession. We will support them in this endeavour to the best of our abilities.

But we must also make the EU itself fit for this major enlargement. That will take time. And that's why we have to start this process now.

As we saw in previous enlargement rounds, reforms in the accession countries went hand in hand with institutional reforms within the European Union. That will also be the case this time around.

We cannot shy away from this debate – not if we're serious about prospects of accession at any rate. And we have to take our promises of accession seriously as this is the only way for us to achieve stability on our continent.

So, let's talk about reforms.

Swift and pragmatic action is called for in the Council of the EU, at the level of ministers. That must be ensured also in the future.

Where unanimity is required today, the risk of an individual country using its veto and preventing all the others from forging ahead increases with each additional member state. Anyone who believes anything else is in denial about the reality of Europe.

I have therefore proposed a gradual transition to majority voting in common foreign policy, but also in other areas, such as tax policy – knowing full well that this would also have repercussions for Germany.

We have to remember that swearing allegiance to the principle of unanimity only works for as long as the pressure to act is low. But at the latest since this watershed, this is no longer the case!

The alternative to majority voting would incidentally not be to hold firm to the status quo. Instead, it would be to move forward in increasingly diverse groups, with a jungle of different rules and complicated opt-ins and opt-outs. That would not be a

form of differentiated integration. Instead, it would be a confusing tangle – and an invitation to all those who want to bet against a united geopolitical Europe and play us off against each other. I don't want that!

My support for majority voting has come in for criticism on occasion. And I can understand the concerns of smaller member states in particular quite well. In the future, too, every country must be listened to – anything other than that would be a betrayal of the European idea.

And because I take these concerns very seriously, my message to you is this: let's seek compromises together! I could imagine, for example, starting with majority voting in areas in which it is particularly important that we speak with one voice. In sanctions policy, for example, or on issues relating to human rights.

And I want us to have the courage to engage in constructive abstention. I believe that we Germans and everyone else who is convinced about majority voting has an obligation here.

If as many people as possible pursue this idea, then we will get very much closer to a geopolitical Europe capable of holding its own on the international stage.

The European Parliament will not be able to shy away from reforms either. It's for good reason that the treaties provide for an upper limit of 751 MEPs. We will exceed this number when new countries join the EU, however – at any rate when we expand Parliament by the seats to which the new member states would be entitled under the rules in force to date.

If we don't want the European Parliament to become bloated, then we need a new balance as far as its composition is concerned. And we need to do this while also respecting the democratic principle according to which each electoral vote carries roughly the same weight.

Last but not least, the right balance between representation and functionality is also at stake in the European Commission. A Commission with 30 or 36 Commissioners would reach the limits of its ability to function. If, moreover, we insist that each Commissioner be responsible for a separate policy area, this would lead – if you will allow me to call to mind another great son of this city – to a Kafkaesque state of affairs.

At the same time, I know how important it is for all member states to be represented in Brussels by “their” Commissioner. That’s also important as it shows that everyone has a seat at the table in Brussels. Everyone takes decisions together.

That’s why I don’t want to change the principle of “one Commissioner per country”.

But what’s wrong with having *two* Commissioners who are jointly responsible for one and the same Directorate-General? This isn’t just a feature of day-to-day work in the decision-making bodies at companies around the world. Such solutions also exist in the governments of a number of member states – both in external representation and in the internal distribution of responsibilities.

So, let’s seek such compromises – for a Europe that works!

The second thought I want to share with you is bound up with a term we have often discussed in recent years: European sovereignty.

My interest here is not in semantics. After all, what European sovereignty means in essence is that we grow more autonomous in all fields; that we assume greater responsibility for our own security; that we stand yet more united in defence of our values and interests around the world.

We are not only forced to do so by Russia’s attack on the European peace order.

I've already mentioned the dependencies we have got ourselves into. Russian energy imports are a particularly striking example, but they are far from the only one. Take, for example, the shortages in the supply of semiconductors.

We need to put an end to such one-sided dependencies as quickly as we can!

Europe owes its prosperity to trade. We must not leave that field to others. We therefore need additional, durable free-trade agreements and an ambitious trade agenda.

When we talk about supplies of mineral resources or rare earths, we chiefly think of countries of origin a long way from Europe. One key fact is often overlooked, however, namely that much of the lithium, cobalt, magnesium and nickel our businesses so desperately rely on is already here in Europe.

In every mobile phone, in every car battery, valuable resources are waiting to be tapped. So, when we talk about economic sovereignty, we should also talk about using that potential a lot more efficiently than we already do.

In many instances, the technology to do so is already in place. What we need are common standards for the transition to a real circular European economy – what I call a strategic update to our internal market.

Economic independence doesn't mean self-sufficiency. That cannot be the goal of a Europe that has always benefited, and continues to benefit, from open markets and trade. But we do need a game plan– something like a Made in Europe 2030 strategy.

What this means in my eyes is that, in those areas where Europe has fallen behind Silicon Valley, Shenzhen, Singapore or Tokyo, we will fight our way back to the top.

Thanks to a real and major European effort, we have already made progress on the chips and semiconductors so vital to our industry. Only recently, for instance, Intel

announced plans to invest billions in France, Poland, Germany, Ireland and Spain – a huge step towards a new generation of “made in Europe” micro-chips.

And that’s just the start. With companies like Infineon, Bosch, NXP and GlobalFoundries, we are working on projects that will make Europe a world leader in technology.

In fact, our ambition will not be limited to merely manufacturing things in Europe that can also be produced elsewhere. I want a Europe that leads the way on important key technologies.

Take future mobility. Data will play a crucial role, not only for autonomous driving systems but also in the coordination of different means of transport and smart management of traffic streams. That’s why we need a single, cross-border European space for mobility data as soon as possible.

We have made a start in Germany with the Mobility Data Space. Let’s connect it up with all of Europe. It’s open to anyone who wants to get something moving. That way, we can be global pioneers.

On the subject of digitalisation, we have to think big – and include space. After all, sovereignty in the digital age will depend on space-based capabilities. Independent access to space, modern satellites and mega-constellations – all of these are crucial not only to our security but also to environmental action, agriculture and, not least, to the digital transition – I’m thinking pan-European broadband internet.

Commercial players and start-ups are playing an ever-greater role on this, as we see in the United States. That’s part of the reason why, in the interests of a strong, competitive European space sector, we need to promote such innovative businesses alongside the established players. Only then will there be a chance of the next SpaceX being a company from Europe.

Last but not least, our great goal of becoming a climate-neutral European Union by 2050 provides us with a huge opportunity, namely to be the first mover in a field that is crucial to the future of humankind – by developing and maturing the technologies here in Europe that are needed and used around the world.

- On electricity, I'm thinking of the creation of the grid and storage infrastructure for a real internal energy market which supplies Europe with hydropower from the North, wind from the coasts and solar energy from the South – reliably, both in summer and in winter.
- I'm thinking of a European hydrogen network connecting producers and consumers and triggering a European electrolysis boom. Only by harnessing hydrogen can the industrial sector be made climate neutral.
- I'm thinking of the densest possible network of vehicle-charging points in each of our countries – for electric cars, but also for HGVs.
- And I'm thinking of investment in new climate-neutral aviation fuels and in the associated infrastructure, for instance at airports, so that the goal of climate-neutral air travel does not remain a dream but becomes a reality – with its origins here in Europe.

This environmental and digital transformation of our economy will require considerable private investment. The basis for this is a strong and solvent EU capital market and a stable financial system. The capital markets union and the banking union are therefore crucial to our future prosperity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All of these are steps towards European sovereignty.

Let me to pick up one other point, because it plays a crucial role in sovereignty and with regard to the war in eastern Europe. We need better synergy in Europe between our defence efforts.

Compared to the US, there are many times more different weapon systems in the EU. That's inefficient, because it means our troops need to train on many different systems. Maintenance and repair are more expensive and difficult too.

The uncoordinated shrinkage of European armed forces and defence budgets of the past should now be followed by a coordinated growth in European capabilities. Next to joint manufacturing and procurement, this will require our businesses to cooperate even more closely on arms projects.

That makes even closer coordination at the European level indispensable. It is therefore high time to have separate meetings in Brussels not only of our agriculture or environment ministers. In these times, we need a separate Council of defence ministers.

To improve the collaboration of our armed forces in very practical terms, we already have a number of tools to hand. Alongside the European Defence Agency and the Defence Fund, I'm thinking chiefly of cooperation like that already being practised in OCCAR, the Organisation for Joint Armament Co-operation. In the same way that we started the open borders of the Schengen area with seven countries back in the day, OCCAR can become the nucleus of a Europe of joint defence and armament.

For that to happen, we will have to review all our national caveats and regulations, such as those pertaining to the use and export of jointly manufactured systems. But that needs to be made possible in the interest of our security and our sovereignty, which do ultimately depend on European armament capabilities.

NATO remains the guarantor of our security. It is also true to say, however, that every improvement, every step towards greater compatibility between European defence structures within the framework of the EU, strengthens NATO.

We should learn lessons from what happened in Afghanistan last summer. In future, the EU must be in a position to respond quickly and effectively. Germany will

therefore work with other EU partners to ensure that the planned EU rapid response force is ready for deployment in 2025 – and provide the core troops for it.

That will require a clear command and control structure. We consequently have to equip the permanent EU planning and conduct capability – and, in the medium term, a real EU HQ – with all the requisite finances, personnel and technology. Germany will assume that responsibility when we head the rapid response force in 2025.

Also, we ultimately have to make our political decision-making processes more flexible, especially in times of crisis. What that means to me is fully exploiting the room for manoeuvre provided by the EU treaties. And yes, that specifically includes making even greater use of the option of entrusting missions to groups of member states prepared to undertake them, known as coalitions of the willing. That is EU division of labour in its best sense.

It has already been agreed that Germany will support Lithuania with a rapidly deployable brigade and NATO with additional high-readiness forces. We are supporting Slovakia in air defence and other areas. We are compensating the Czech Republic and other countries with tanks of German build for their provision of Soviet tanks to Ukraine. At the same time, we have made an agreement for our armed forces to collaborate much more closely.

The 100 billion euro with which we in Germany will be modernising the Bundeswehr in the coming years will also strengthen European and transatlantic security.

We have a lot of catching up to do in Europe when it comes to defence against airborne and space-based threats. That is why we in Germany will be investing very significantly in our air defence over the years ahead. All of those capabilities will be deployable within the framework of NATO. At the same time, Germany will, from the very start, design that future air defence in such a way that our European neighbours can be involved if desired – such as the Poles, Balts, Netherlanders, Czechs, Slovaks or our Scandinavian partners.

Not only would a jointly developed air defence system in Europe be more efficient and cost-effective than if each of us built our own costly and highly complex systems; it would also be a security gain for Europe as a whole, and an outstanding example of what we mean when we talk about strengthening the European pillar within NATO.

The third major area requiring action that I see for Europe follows from the recent watershed moment – and simultaneously goes far beyond it.

Putin's Russia looks set to continue defining itself by opposition to Europe. Any disunity among us, any weakness, is grist to Putin's mill.

Other autocrats are imitating him; just look at the way Belarusian dictator Lukashenko tried to put us under political pressure last year through the suffering of thousands of refugees and migrants from the Middle East.

And China as well as others exploit the flanks that we Europeans expose when we disagree.

The consequences of this for Europe might be summarised thus: we must close ranks, resolve old conflicts and find new solutions. That may sound obvious – but there is a lot of work behind these words.

Take just the two areas that have caused probably the greatest tensions among us in years gone by: migration and finance policy.

We are capable of making progress on migration policy; we proved that after Russia's attack on Ukraine, when the EU activated its Temporary Protection Directive for the first time. The reality behind that obscure name is, for millions of Ukrainians, a little bit of normality far from home: a swift and secure residence permit, the opportunity to work, the right to attend school or a university like this one.

People will come to Europe in future too, whether seeking protection from war and prosecution or looking for work and a better life.

Europe remains a dream destination for millions across the globe. On the one hand, that's shining proof of the attractiveness of our continent. At the same time, it's a reality which we Europeans need to deal with.

That means managing migration for the long term, instead of always just reacting to crises ad hoc. And that means reducing irregular migration and simultaneously enabling people to migrate legally. Because we need immigration. We are currently seeing in our airports, our hospitals and in many businesses that we are short of skilled labour all over the place.

A number of points strike me as key:

- Firstly, we need more binding partnerships with countries of origin and transit – as equal partners. If we offer workers more legal routes to Europe, there must in return be more readiness on the part of countries of origin to enable their own citizens to return when they have no right to remain.
- Secondly, functioning migration policy includes protection of external borders that is both effective and aligned with our standards of due process. The Schengen area – border-free travel, life and work – stands or falls with that protection.

Schengen is one of the greatest achievements of the European Union, and we should protect and develop it. This means, incidentally, closing the remaining gaps. Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria fulfil all the technical requirements for full membership. I will work to see them become full members.

- Thirdly, Europe needs an asylum system built on solidarity and immune to crises. We have a duty to offer a safe home to people in need of protection. Under the French Presidency of recent months, we have agreed on a step-by-step approach.

Now, the European Parliament should give it due consideration too. The Czech Presidency can count on our full support in the negotiations with the Parliament.

And finally, we should be swifter than before in giving people who are legally in the EU as beneficiaries of protection the opportunity to take employment in other EU member states – to use their skills where they are needed.

And because we are not naive, we need to prevent abuse at the same time – in cases, for instance, where there is no actual desire to work. If we can manage that, then freedom of movement won't result in overwhelmed social-security systems. That way, we will secure lasting public support for this great European freedom.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The field that, next to migration policy, has most divided us Europeans in recent years is fiscal policy.

However, the historic recovery programme agreed on during the COVID crisis marks a turning point. For the first time, we jointly gave a European response and supported national investment and reform programmes with EU funds. We agreed to invest together in order to strengthen our countries' economies. Incidentally, that is also helping us in the current crisis.

Ideology gave way to pragmatism. We should take that as our guide when we consider how to develop our shared rules beyond the context of the COVID crisis. One thing is clear: a common monetary area needs common rules that can be upheld and verified. This generates trust and makes solidarity possible when emergencies arise.

The crises of recent years have now caused debt levels to rise in all member states. We therefore need an agreement on how we intend to bring those high levels down.

That agreement has to be binding, facilitate growth and be politically marketable. And, at the same time, it must enable all EU member states to weather the transformation of our economies by means of investment.

At the beginning of the month, we, the German Government, outlined our vision for the further development of the European debt rules. It follows that logic. We want to talk about it openly with all our European partners – without prejudice, without lecturing, without blame games. We want to jointly discuss what a sustainable rule book can look like following this watershed moment.

Something very fundamental is at stake here. This is about giving people certainty that our currency is safe and irreversible – that they can rely on their states and on the European Union even in times of crisis.

One of the best examples of our recent success in this area has been the European SURE programme. We set it up during the COVID crisis to finance working-time reduction schemes. More than 30 million people across the EU have benefited from it – which equates to one in seven workers who would presumably have been out of a job otherwise.

At the same time, creating that incentive at the European level has allowed us to introduce the successful model of working-time reduction almost everywhere in Europe. The result is a more robust labour market and healthier businesses throughout Europe.

That's how I envisage pragmatic solutions in Europe – now and in the future.

This watershed moment should make European politics seek to build bridges rather than tear open trenches.

The public expect an EU that delivers. The outcome of the Conference on the Future shows that very clearly.

The public expect very concrete things from the EU: more speed on climate action, for instance; healthy food; more sustainable supply chains; and better protections for workers. In short, they expect the “de facto solidarity” that was already spoken of in the Schuman Declaration of 1950. It’s up to us to keep articulating the arguments for that de facto solidarity and to adapt it to the challenges of changing times.

In the founding decades of our united Europe, that chiefly meant rendering war between the members impossible by means of ever-closer economic integration. The fact that this succeeded is to the lasting historic credit of our union.

In the intervening years, however, the project for peace has also become a pan-European project for freedom and justice. That is primarily thanks to those countries which didn’t join our community until later: the Spanish, Greeks and Portuguese, who turned to a Europe of freedom and democracy after decades of dictatorship, and then the people of Central and Eastern Europe, whose fight for freedom, human rights and justice won through the Cold War.

Among them were many courageous students of this university, whose call for freedom on a dark November night in 1989 was so loud that it became a revolution. That Velvet Revolution was a stroke of luck for Europe.

Peace and freedom, democracy and the rule of law, human rights and human dignity – these values of the European Union are a heritage we gained together. At this of all times, facing the renewed threat to freedom, pluralism and democracy in the east of our continent, we feel that connection especially strongly.

States are maintained by the ideals which gave them birth – it was one of the most famous professors of this university who expressed that idea: Tomáš Masaryk, who would later become president of Czechoslovakia. That sentence applies to states, but it also applies to the EU, our community of shared values. And because values are essential to the EU’s continued existence, it concerns us all when those values are violated – both outside Europe and even more so within Europe.

That's the fourth thought I want to share with you today.

This is why it worries us when there is talk right in the middle of Europe of “illiberal democracy”, as if that weren't a contradiction in terms.

We therefore cannot stand by when the principles of due process are violated and democratic oversight is dismantled. And just to make this absolutely clear, there must be no tolerance in Europe for racism and antisemitism.

That's why we are supporting the Commission in its work for the rule of law. The European Parliament is also following the subject with close attention. I am very grateful for that.

We should not shy away from using all the means at our disposal to correct failings. Surveys show that everywhere – including, incidentally, in Hungary and Poland – a large majority of the general public actually want the EU to do more to stand up for freedom and democracy in their countries.

Those means include the rule-of-law procedure under Article 7 of the TEU. Here as elsewhere, we need to come away from the ways in which progress can be blocked.

It also seems sensible to consistently tie payments to the maintenance of standards of due process – as we have done with the 2021-2027 Financial Framework and the Recovery Fund in the COVID crisis.

And we should give the Commission a new way to launch infringement proceedings when there are breaches of what unites us at the very core: our fundamental values, enshrined by all of us in the EU Treaty, of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and defence of human rights.

At the same time, I would prefer not to have arguments about the rule of law go all the way to court. What we therefore most need, next to all the procedures and sanctions, is an open dialogue at the political level about failings, which exist in all countries.

The Commission's report on the rule of law, with its country-specific recommendations, provides a good basis for this. We will keep a close political eye on the implementation of those recommendations – and do our own housekeeping too.

After all, the rule of law is a fundamental value which should bind our union together. Especially at this time, with autocracy challenging our democracies, it is more important than ever.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I've already mentioned the brave students of this university who set the Velvet Revolution in motion on the night of 17 November 1989.

On the university campus in Albertov Street, where their protest began, a small bronze plaque today commemorates the moment. It bears two sentences, and I hope my pronunciation is more or less right: "Kdy, když ne teď? Kdo, když ne my." When, if not now? Who, if not me?

Speaking today, from Prague, I want to shout out those sentences to all Europeans – to those already living in our union, and to those hopefully joining us soon. I want to shout them out to the political decision-makers, my colleagues and counterparts, with whom we tussle on a daily basis in the search for solutions in Brussels, Strasbourg and our capitals.

This is about our future, which is called Europe. That Europe is being challenged today as never before.

When, if not now – as Russia tries to shift the line between freedom and autocracy – will we lay the cornerstones of an enlarged union of freedom, security and democracy?

When, if not now, will we create a sovereign Europe that can hold its own in a multipolar world?

When, if not now, will we overcome the differences that have hobbled and divided us for years?

And who, if not us, can protect and defend Europe's values – both at home and abroad?

Europe is our future. And that future is in our hands.

Thank you kindly.