



The European house must be built in solidarity

An Hermans

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Honourable ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

It is a great pleasure for me to be part of this celebration, organized to mark this special period for the Czech Republic. Thank you for the invitation. It is an honour for me to speak to you today.

Through the title of this event *'The European house, built on a rock or on sand?'* the organizers have given a question to all the speakers, so I didn't have to look for a subject for my speech, I just must answer your question. And I will do so, but not before presenting some reflections on the important leading role the Czech Republic plays in Europe, at this time, with the leitmotif, the motto that you have chosen for these six months of Presidency of the Council of the EU: ***'Europe as a task: rethink, rebuild, repower.'***

The priorities of the Czech's presidency are reflected in its motto: *'Europe as a task: rethink, rebuild, repower.'* It will focus on five closely linked priority areas as a response to the current challenges in Europe, in solidarity with Ukraine and its reconstruction as its top priorities. Prioritizing the resilience of democratic institutions, including focusing on the protection of media freedom and the rule of law, can be seen as an overall ambition to restore trust in EU politics and strengthen democracy in our societies.

The slogan *"Europe as a Task"* reminds us of the title of a speech made by Václav Havel (1936-2011) in 1996. Almost a quarter of a century ago, Havel was speaking about the history and future of Europe and referred to threats to civilisation, potential conflicts, limited resources, damage to the environment and growing social inequalities. He highlighted the political need for European unity and described the EU as a peerless attempt to make Europe into a unified, democratic space of solidarity.

Today, all these years later, his words sound as the crystal-clear appeal for European unity founded on the basic values of the European project. This is, dear ladies and gentlemen, the European house, where neither the basic values, nor the building blocks, nor the decorations... can we take for granted. As we want to stand for Europe, we must renew the basic choices, and

build them together each day anew. Our founding fathers even knew it, as it was already stated in the Schuman Declaration (1950):

*"Europe will not be made all at once,
or according to a single plan.
It will be built through concrete achievements which
first create a de facto solidarity."*

We warmly welcome the reference by the Government of the Czech Republic to the legacy of its first President. In the current European and global context, it is a huge opportunity that the Czech Republic will take over the role of president of the Council of the EU up to the end of the year 2022.

The Czech presidency, in line with the French and the Swedish presidencies of the Council of the EU, and in cooperation with the European Parliament and the EU Commission, will have to go through a complex and challenging period. The EU Commission's priorities for the governance period 2019-2024 will be overshadowed in the coming months by the implementation of the EU and member states' Recovery plans following the COVID-19 pandemic, and by the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine destroying the country, disrupting Europe's security architecture, and changing the geopolitical power relations in military, economic, cultural, and moral fields. And certainly not to forget the challenge inside Europe: how to protect our own people against threats such as unemployment, the rising prices of vital products, precarious jobs, rising inequalities...? This is also the political challenging horizon to deal with, seen from a people-centred view, seen from the inside of the European house. Citizens are expecting that they can live and work in a safe environment, to live a fulfilling life and that they can count on their governments and political representatives to build up a trustworthy economic and political Union, guaranteeing peace and prosperity and strengthening autonomy against the threatening geopolitical situation of today.

A prerequisite for European decisions in all these dimensions, in the first place for all aspects of geopolitical action, is unity, standing for our values, for the rule of law, for democracy and to act together in solidarity. This is a challenge for governments and for active citizens in civil society organisations. Let me point out that this is also the expectation and hope of older generations in Europe, of the group, the network of seniors' associations for which I have the honour of speaking here today.

The ageing of our societies is one of the 'megatrends' of the 21st century, having a major impact not only on older people, but challenging all sectors of society. A policy answer to most of the questions related to ageing is within the competence of the Member States and local governments. Of course, the EU can play a major role in coordinating strategies and promoting age-friendly policies for the benefit of all generations.

After many years of discussions and a lot of calls to develop a 'general strategy' to cope with the opportunities and burdens of ageing societies, the new EU Commission's decisions, together with the recent initiatives of the Council of the EU, are responding to the many challenges of demographic change, considering the differences and problems between and within regions. Important aspects of the new policy are: mainstreaming ageing in all policy

areas, a human rights approach, healthy ageing as a dimension of the life-course and the inclusion of older persons in the digital era. It is obvious that the implementation and the results of these policies require the cooperation of all policy levels, but also of civil society. We hope that also in these fields the Czech presidency will take over the baton from the previous presidencies of the Council of the EU and will take to heart a policy for demographic change for the benefit of all generations.

Let me finally conclude this reflection on the ambitions of the Czech presidency of the EU Council, not by some advice but by some wishes, wishes for the chairmanship, wishes for successful European actions, and wishes for us all.

- Let us build the European house and light up the European stars again.
- Let's light up the European project. The European project, the common ground of values, the European way of life can't be taken for granted. Let's awaken the European consciousness, reflecting on the European project and making it accessible to as many people as possible.
- Let's light up the concept of solidarity and strengthen active European citizenship.

We wish the Czech presidency of the Council and all European institutions a lot of success in taking up the priorities of this presidency and coping with the European and global challenges ahead. I hope that solidarity will be a solid cement among the decision-makers, but also among all European people. May the priority of resilience of our democratic institutions provide a foundation for the further development of European cooperation, cohesion, and the unification process.

- Let's light up the European dimension throughout politics at all levels, to build and develop the European house of unity in diversity, the house that our founders conceived, and older generations fought for, a house of freedom and peace, democracy, and the rule of law, bringing well-being, prosperity, and progress.
- Let's stand together with all those who are fighting also today for freedom and peace and to build new perspectives together for a sustainable and safe future.
- Let's light up the hope for a sustainable European future, a Europe we want to stand for.

Being the guardians of the founding values of Europe,

we need to build together...

A sustainable European house for the future

I wish the Czech presidency a lot of success!

*An Hermans
ESU President*