



European Commission - Speech [Check Against Delivery]



Speech by President von der Leyen at the inaugural event of the Conference on the Future of Europe

Strasbourg, 9 May 2021

President Macron,

Prime Minister Costa,

President Sassoli,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am thrilled to finally be back here in Strasbourg for this very special Europe Day. This city symbolises so much of our history – so it is fitting that we are here to talk about our future.

And when I think about that future – and this Conference – I am reminded of one of this city's adopted sons: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. I think in particular of his book, *Terre des hommes*, published just before the Second World War. In his own poetic style, he brings to life the fear and the pain, the love and the hope, that are inside all of us. He reminds us of the importance of living with one another and also with the natural world around us. And of our duty to leave a better world to our children.

While many things have changed, what he says still rings true of the world today. And there is one line in particular which I believe sums up Europe and what this Conference should be about: 'Love is not just looking at each other, it's looking together in the same direction.'

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is the task – and the opportunity – ahead of us all. The Conference is for all Europeans to debate a shared vision of what we want our Union to be. Of course, I am conscious that there is always scepticism and cynicism whenever Europe debates its future or launches a project of this nature.

So we must ensure it is not an intellectual policy exercise or a closed political compromise. We should be honest that the Conference is not a panacea or a solution to every problem. And we must listen to all voices – whether critical or complimentary – and ensure that we properly follow up on whatever is agreed.

But I do believe that this Conference is a real opportunity to bring Europeans together and to rally around a common ambition for our future just as previous generations did. And we should also not underestimate the power of good that it could do – for people individually and for society as a whole. The point is that the EU must be whatever Europeans want it to be.

Of course, the start of the Conference is not the time to predict or prescribe outcomes. But there are certain dichotomies and issues that we should attempt to resolve. For example, some feel Europe is too close and too involved in their lives. For others it is too far remote or too detached. This is an opportunity for Europeans to help find the right balance. For some, Europe is too institutional or mechanical in the way that it works.

This is an opportunity to see how we can simplify and make it more down to earth where it is needed. For some, the narrative of peace is not as compelling as for others. This is an opportunity to help build a new common purpose for all Europeans. I believe the Conference needs to talk about what makes the EU – what it is. We see how true that is when we look at the world around us – globalised but fragmented, full of contradictions and confrontations. It reminds us of the importance of a shared sense of purpose and that none of us can go it alone.

The pandemic has been traumatic for people in Europe and around the world. It will be a formative part of so many lives and of so many parts of society. And like all trauma, we need to find a way to talk about it if we want to move beyond it. And there is no better way to do that than by offering perspective, hope and an ability to change things for the better.

This is why I believe it is such an important moment for young people in particular to have their say.

This pandemic stole more than just a year from them. It stole experiences and emotions that every young person needs. It stole fun and friendships that shape people forever. It stole opportunities from them to grow, to learn and take risks. And more than anything, it made so many people – young and old – feel anxious, lonely and simply less in control of their lives and their future. For the first time in a generation, more people worry that their children will not be better off than them. This shows that we need a new form of solidarity and social justice between generations.

It is a question of fairness and rights, not only within today's society but over generations. And that is why the latest court rulings in several Member States on the obligation to tackle our exploitation of the natural environment using specific, long-term measures are such a game-changer. We cannot replace the lost time which the pandemic has taken from young people, but we can build something better and fairer, for them and with them.

We have to act now, and young people must play a central role in this change. The task is huge. Paradoxically, a great deal needs to change so that everything remains the way we need it to be to sustain life. Things have to change fundamentally, so that the next generation can also continue to be surrounded by nature. We must change so that our grandchildren might also know spring, summer, autumn and winter. But real change cannot happen through court rulings alone.

It happens through policies and politics. So I believe we should use this conference to have a real and structured dialogue between generations on how we can preserve livelihoods. The stakes are just as high as they were in 1950, when Schuman presented his declaration – the devastation of war and conflict at the time still fresh in his memory. But let us be under no illusion. There is just as much at stake because climate change can easily develop the destructive power of war.

My view on this is that Europe has always been at its best when it is reverse-engineered. We are at our boldest when we first set an ambitious goal or have to act out of necessity – often without competence or precedence. This is the Europe that rises to the challenge. The Europe that just does it, because it needs to be done. It is not so long ago that the environment was a fringe or peripheral issue for the European Union. But it is now the most central issue for our generation and for the generations to come.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The leadership and empathy that young people have shown since the start of the pandemic inspire us – and give us hope and a responsibility to build a better world. And just one month ago, I was given a personal and powerful reminder of that, when I became a grandmother for the first time.

Hugging my granddaughter for the first time was one of those moments that puts everything into perspective and reminds you of what is really important in life. In that instant of tenderness and love, she showed me something we must never forget: We are always young enough to believe in the world, and always old enough to make a difference. This is what binds generations together – what unites them.

And holding that little girl in my arms, I did what every new parent or grandparent does. I thought of all the possibilities that lie ahead of her and tried to picture the world she will grow up in. Will there be forests or wildlife that she will only be able to see in books or films? What will her career and jobs be like and what technologies will she use? Will social disparities and inequalities widen or narrow? And what about Europe? What will it do, what will it stand for? Will it be united? Or will it be divided as it was in the past?

These questions can feel too big or too distant when there are so many immediate challenges ahead of us. But the direction we take today will shape the answers we are seeking for tomorrow. And this is precisely why we need this Conference and why we need it to start now.

We approach this task with humility, acknowledging that not everything is perfect. But also with pride in knowing where our Union comes from, and a conviction about what it must always do. And on that note I shall finish where I started, with Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Because he was the one who inspired Jean Monnet with his phrase : 'Man's noblest endeavour is to unite his fellow men.' That is what we must continue to do.

Thank you and long live Europe!

SPEECH/21/2381

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