



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

Strasbourg, 9 May 2022

*« Nous devons penser et planifier une Europe unie comme si chaque jour il était possible de la créer immédiatement, rejetant la lassitude de ceux qui la renvoient toujours à demain. Le possible, s'il est vraiment possible, nous pouvons commencer à le réaliser aujourd'hui. »*

President Metsola, dear Roberta,

Président Macron, cher Emmanuel,

Prime Minister Costa, querido António,

Dear Dubravka Šuica,

Dear Guy Verhofstadt,

Cher ministre, Clément Beaune,

Excellences,

Honourable Members,

But most and foremost, my dear and fellow Europeans,

On this very special day of Europe, I could not think of a more fitting way to start than by using these words of Ursula Hirschmann. For those who do not know her story, Ursula Hirschmann was an architect and builder of today's free and united Europe. She resisted the rise of Nazism in Berlin in the early 1930s – she shaped the future of Europe on the island of Ventotene in the 1940s – she pioneered women's rights all across Europe.

The courage of her actions and of her convictions helped to make Europe what it is today. I start with this picture because, for Europe, the memory of our past has always framed our future. And that is all the more important at a time when the unthinkable has returned to our continent. Russia's flagrant attempts to redraw maps and to rewrite even the most tragic parts of our history have reminded us of the dangers of losing our grip on both our past and our future. Of living in a perpetual present and thinking that things can never be different. That there cannot be better ways of doing things. And even worse: That things will always stay the same if only we do not change. That is so wrong! Standing still is falling back.

But this Conference has shown us that Europeans are determined not to make this mistake. You have told us that you want to build a better future by living up to the most enduring promises of the past. Promises of peace and prosperity, fairness and progress; of a Europe that is social and sustainable, that is caring and daring. Just like Ursula Hirschmann and all those who went before us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Conference has spoken clearly. And I am delighted to see so many of you here today. Through your 49 proposals and more than 300 measures, you have weaved and crafted a vision of a Europe that delivers on what matters most, that helps to make everyday life better, that is not confined to one place but is at your side when you need it. On every day priorities – such as the air we breathe and the food we eat, the education that we give our children and the houses that we bring them up in.

It is a vision of a Europe that pools its strengths and capacities and diversity to tackle the biggest challenges – from climate change or nature loss, to pandemics or security in our region. A Europe that has a stronger capacity to activate and uphold its values and the rule of law. A Europe that is able to provide for itself in vital areas, from energy to food, from materials to medicines, from digital chips to green technologies. A Europe that delivers unique social protections and benefits all the way through these major transitions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to address every single one of you who took part in this Conference: Your message has been well received. And now, it is time to deliver. That is what I promised when I stood for election in this very House, two and a half years ago. And together, we have proven that we can do just that with the powers that already exist – even amidst the pandemic or a war. Whether procuring billions of vaccines for citizens across Europe and our neighbourhood, or kick-starting the economy after the pandemic through NextGenerationEU. Whether setting an ambitious and legally binding path to climate neutrality, or setting the rules of the game in the digital world, or supporting small businesses to retain their staff during the pandemic.

None of this – none – would have been explicitly foreseen in the Treaties, but it was possible. And we did it together – because Europeans expected their Union to step up. Next month already, we will set out what is needed to bring your proposals to life and respond the best we can. In some areas, your proposals give us a push to speed up work already ongoing – for example on the European Green Deal or on making society fairer. So that means accelerating negotiations on the Fit for 55 Package so that we can boost renewable energies, that we can save energy and finally wean ourselves off fossil fuels. It has to be like this. And it means ensuring that our proposal on minimum wages becomes law so that work pays for all.

In other areas, we have already started the work you have asked for. The Health Working Group, for example, proposed creating a European Health Data Space, which would facilitate the exchange of health data across borders. My Commission delivered on this last week with a proposal. And in the next weeks and months, we will bring out proposals, you have been asking for. For example, restoring our nature, or cutting down waste coming from packaging, or banning products made by forced labour from entering our European market. On all of these upcoming ideas, we will look closely at your proposals so that we can best cater for what you have been asking for.

The point is, there is already a lot we can do without delay. And that also goes for those recommendations which will need us to take new action. So to make sure that we follow up swiftly, I will announce the first new proposals responding to your report in my State of the Union Address in September already. But, my fellow Europeans, even beyond this, there is a need to go further. For example, I have always argued that unanimity voting in some key areas simply no longer makes sense if we want to be able to move faster. Or that Europe should play a greater role – for example, in health or defence, after the experience of the last two years. And we need to improve the way our democracy works on a permanent basis. I want to be clear that I will always be on the side of those who want to reform the European Union to make it work better.

The point is, you have told us where you want this Europe to go. And it is now up to us to take the most direct way there, either by using the full limits of what we can do within the Treaties, or, yes, by changing the Treaties if need be.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear fellow Europeans,

*'Democracy has not gone out of fashion, but it must update itself in order to keep improving people's lives.'* Those are the words of David Sassoli – a great European, who stood here a year ago, together with you, dear António Costa, to launch this Conference. We all miss him dearly and I have a very special place for him in my heart today.

And I feel pride that citizens from every corner of Europe have brought to life his vision of a vibrant and modern European democracy. We saw it in the National Citizens' Panels, such as those held right across France. And we saw it in the European Citizens' Panels – from Dublin to Natolin, from Florence to Maastricht. It connected men and women who have never engaged with Europe before. Different stories, different languages, different identities; but one shared future to build on.

You have proven that this form of democracy works. And I believe, we should give it more room, it should become part of the way we make policy. This is why I will propose that, in the future, we give Citizens' Panels the time and resources to make recommendations before we present key legislative proposals. Because I am convinced that democracy does not end with elections, conferences or conventions. It needs to be worked on, nurtured and improved every day. We saw it in the grassroots events held right across Europe. Whether debating biodiversity in Varna, gender-based violence in Lisbon, or democracy and subsidiarity in Budapest. And we saw it, indeed, in the image of Linda, the young mother – we saw her earlier this day – speaking about the future in this very hemicycle while holding her baby born, halfway through the Conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is the image I want us to celebrate on 9 May. An image far more powerful than any military

parade going up and down the streets of Moscow as we speak. And I want this image to remind us to never ever take for granted what Europe is and what it means. Europe is a dream. A dream that always was. A dream born from tragedy.

But today, that dream shines brightest not only here in this historic place. It shines brightest in the hearts and the minds of the people of Kyiv and Kharkiv, of Odessa and Mariupol. It shines brightest in the courage of those families and young people bunkered down in subways and basements. It shines brightest in the courage of those mourning the senseless, mindless atrocities in Bucha, and in Irpin, and in every Ukrainian village and town struck by war. And it shines brightest in the eyes of all those young Ukrainians who have found a refuge in Europe – a home away from home. Those people, my fellow Europeans, – young and old – are willing to fight and to die for their future and for that dream of Europe. That dream that always was. That dream that must always be.

So I want to finish with a message. This morning, I had a videoconference with President Zelenskyy. And he wanted to virtually hand me over his answers to the questionnaire of the Commission for the accession process he has applied to. It is more than 5,000 pages he handed over to me. And therefore, I want to give a very special message to our Ukrainian friends and family. The future of Europe is also your future. The future of our democracy is also the future of your democracy. 72 years ago, war in Europe was replaced with something different, something new. First a Community, today a Union. It was the day when the future began. It is a future that we have been writing together ever since – as architects and builders of Europe. And the next page, dear Ukrainian friends, is now being written by you. By us. By all of us together.

Slava Ukraini. Long live Europe.

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