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A Fight for Freedom - How Putin's war renews Europe

Eerste Minister Alexander De Croo hield vandaag op Europadag in de Französischer Dom in Berlijn een Europa-toespraak. Europa moet de Europese droom herstellen, voor iedereen in Europa. Onder meer door veel nauwer samen te werken op het vlak van energie en defensie, en de hand te reiken naar landen die de Europese waarden van vrijheid, democratie en mensenrechten omarmen.

Meine Damen und Herren,
Liebe Freunde,

Lassen Sie mich zunächst der Friedrich-Naumann Stiftung dafür danken, dass sie mir am Europatag hier an diesem besonderen Ort, dem Französischen Dom, das Wort erteilt hat.

Eine französische Kathedrale im Herzen der deutschen Hauptstadt, erbaut für Protestanten auf der Flucht vor religiöser Verfolgung. Nur wenige Schritte vom Brandenburger Tor, dem Symbol der deutschen Einheit.

It is hard to imagine a more fitting place to reflect on the values that cement our European project and unite our European family.

Solidarity with people in need, leaving no-one behind, while vigorously defending our freedoms.

These European values have never been more under attack than today.

- Freedom, democracy and German leadership -

With his war in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin is brutally murdering Ukrainians, victims of his deranged, imperialist fantasies. He denies them to be free people, to make free choices, to live a free life. -

I choose my words very carefully: we are talking about the most serious war crimes in Europe of the past 70 years.

But Putin is not only aggressing against Ukraine. He is also pounding Europe:

- With disinformation campaigns, fake news and hackings to de-stabilize our democracies and turning our people against each other,
- By weaponizing energy to attack our purchasing power and undermine our prosperity.
- By abusing refugees to test our sense of solidarity.

We are up against a regime that is morally bankrupt. A regime bent on subjugating people. A regime intent on undermining trust between Europeans.

This war in Ukraine has pushed us Europeans on a historic crossroad. The choice in front of us is a simple one: either we stick to old recipes and old structures and Europe will unravel, or we renew Europe, become

stronger and more resilient as a block. Still open to the world – but no longer in a naive way.

By putting our interests and our citizens first, protecting people and safeguarding our European way of life. That is our Leitmotif. Always has been, always will be.

We can and we shall do this, with European strength and leadership. And that is why we need Germany. Because when Germany spreads its wings, Europe can fly. Not just because of your size and position, but more so because of your deep understanding of West and East. Because of the strong democracy and the solid rule of law you have built after 1945.

That was my message to President Steinmeier this afternoon and it will be my message to Chancellor Scholz tomorrow.

Germany has learned the hard way that simply handing over power to the majority leads to tyranny. That freedom is also about safeguarding fundamental rights of minorities. That Freedom is not just doing whatever you want, whenever you want. Not for leaders, not for citizens – it's one of the big lessons of COVID. Like Rüdiger Safranski wrote in his recent book *Einzelnen sein*: freedom and togetherness are defining to our human condition. Freedom is also belonging to a free society of others.

It is this freedom and this free society that Vladimir Putin is waging war against. He first destroyed it in Russia. Now he is destroying it in Ukraine and if we do nothing and do not push back: he will destroy it in Europe as well. Because Putin hates the idea of people governing themselves.

These are two systems colliding: autocracy against democracy. Autocracy based on a culture of oppression and violence. While democracy is a culture of humanity, consensus and respect for fundamental rights. It is the culture of death versus the culture of life. For in autocracies the price of a human life is indeed very low.

So, this is our political mission on this Europe day: to build a stronger, more resilient European democracy. To anchor our democracy in strong and stable institutions. To make these institutions accessible to all. To engage all citizens in deciding. To secure our freedom and prosperity for the years and decades to come. And if this sounds as a wholly unoriginal idea to you, you are absolutely right.

It is the essence of democracy: the work is never done. There is no 'end of history'. Only crossroads that urge us to keep on moving.

I see three priorities to move forward: defense, energy and enlargement.

– Defence: two legs for NATO –

Making Europe a more solid military bloc is a first priority. Not by competing with NATO or by walking away from it, but by bolstering it with a strong European pillar.

We are lucky that today President Biden is the captain of our transatlantic ship, but we should not be naïve: no more than five years ago, the American president was openly questioning our collective defense, the cornerstone of our Atlantic alliance. Today, Donald Trump might be gone, but Trumpism is far from gone. 'America First' is still very much alive in US politics.

We simply cannot make ourselves dependent on who will be the next occupant of the White House – and I

am saying this as a strong and staunch supporter of transatlantic cooperation. We must take our destiny more into our own hands. And we can do this.

Since the Schuman Declaration, exactly 72 years ago, we have achieved so much. We have built a single market. A single currency. A customs union. And, even more important, a community of values. Now Europe must become a military-industrial bloc too.

By taking three steps.

- First: less fragmentation. We all know the figures: the US has 4 types of war ships, Europe has 30. The same for tanks and aircrafts. This fragmentation weakens our defense budgets, we have to turn this around.
- Second step: we must build a stronger European defense industry, able to compete with other global players. If we increase our defense budgets and investments in military technology, let it be European technology. Developed in Europe, built in Europe. With European return on investment.
- And the third step: our society as a whole should benefit more directly from our military investments. Strengthening the cyber security of our businesses. Enhancing military intelligence in the fight against terrorism. Providing an education to our young people.

The building blocks are there.

We can use military partnerships that already exist and scale them up.

Like Belgium and the Netherlands, whose air forces work closely together, and whose navies are fully integrated by linking military logic to economic logic.

And of course, we must make all these efforts in close consultation with our American friends. But it is up to us, to Europe, so NATO can finally stand on two full legs, a strong American leg and an equally advanced European one.

By stepping up our efforts, we will better protect our fragile European values.

Because our values are fragile indeed.

Anti-democrats like Vladimir Putin use the open and tolerant nature of our democracy to break it. Holding mock elections at home while hacking real elections abroad. It is like the Dutch poet Lucebert wrote: *"Everything of value is defenseless", "Alles Wertvolle ist wehrlos"*. Our democracy is one of the most valuable assets and it is our job to rally to her defense.

- Energy: independence and investment -

Ladies and gentlemen,

Alongside defense, energy is the second domain in which Europe must act. To make us energy independent from the rest of the world, to drive prices down, to drive emissions down.

For let us be honest: Europe has cuddled up to Russia for cheap Russian oil and gas for too long. I also strongly believed in *Wandel durch Handel*. In change through trade. That we could have a win-win situation. But we were wrong. When you dance with the devil, the devil changes you and not the other way around. It blinded us. It made us complacent. And if we do not act swiftly and decisively, it will cripple us.

Here, too, the building blocks are ready.

We need to finalize our single energy market. To the benefit of all Europeans. More interconnected. More focused on homegrown renewable energy. Instead of buying fossil fuels from autocrats, we should be buying and selling energy from each other. Trading hydropower from the north with solar power from the south and wind power from our seas.

If we are serious about this, we should put our money where our mouth is. And develop a new, ambitious European plan, financed on the European level, dedicated to European projects; large-scale energy investments with a clear focus:

1. on renewable energy
2. on transnational projects like interconnectors
3. And on the development of new cutting-edge, high-risk but promising technologies. Europe should be a leader in this. Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium are showing the way forward in clean hydrogen. We should also work together in developing zero-waste nuclear.

Europe has proven it is possible to join forces in developing COVID-vaccines. We shall prove it again with energy. Confronting climate change, achieving carbon neutrality and lowering energy prices as one union. Affordable energy for all Europeans.

- Uniting our continent -

Ladies and gentlemen,

Energy is not the only hot topic on our plate. The war in Ukraine has made one elephant in the room unavoidable. The elephant of 'EU enlargement'.

The term 'enlargement' has become quite toxic, used and abused by anti-Europeans. It is also a somewhat misleading term. The flag doesn't really cover the cargo. More than about enlarging our union, it is about "uniting" Europe. Creating an economic union and a community of values with all the people on our continent who fiercely believe in freedom and democracy.

If you look at it geopolitically, integrating Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkan is something we really must do. Nothing would be more dangerous for Europe than to sit still, defend the status quo and retreat behind our borders. Our European neighborhood would be turned into vassal states. Either through military force by Russia, or through an aggressive investment policy, that we are already seeing today in the Balkans.

People in our neighborhood are looking to us, to Europe for change, for democracy, for a better life. Let's not hand our neighbors on a platter to autocratic powers. It would be a denial of our very values. The question is: how can this European unification also be a unification of values: of democracy, the rule of law

and civil liberties for all?

We must be frank: it is a hard nut to crack. In our current union, we are struggling with this issue as well.

Success is not guaranteed, but it has been done before. Here in Germany. There would not have been a *Wirtschaftswunder* without a *Demokratiewunder*.

We need to apply the same logic to our neighborhood. Being less of a supervisor, and more of a companion, on economic reform, on the rule of law, on institution building.

And above all we must make clear that our values are not just Northern or Western European, but European values full stop. That means equal rights for women and men, including sexual and reproductive rights, the right to safe abortion and accessible health care. Equal rights for LGBTI people. So that they can be out and proud. Full freedom of speech: for journalists, for religious people, for all citizens. The freedom to believe without the fear of being diminished. It is about the fight against all forms of discrimination.

Some people will say: many of these rights were only recently acquired. All the more reason to enshrine them into the heart of our European project. We fought too long and too hard to give up these rights; or allow member states to push back at them. For me, these values are part and parcel of our liberal democracy, our European way of life and they are non-negotiable.

So how do we get there?

In the case of Ukraine this means linking reconstruction to reform. The country is experiencing its *Stunde Null*. We have to help reconstructing cities and streets while at the same time building strong democratic institutions. Like Germany did after World War II.

The challenge is not bureaucratic or legalistic, it is a geostrategic one. It is a project of value integration and the single biggest challenge of our European generation. This is not done overnight. It will take years of determination to achieve.

Today, we need to anchor Ukraine solidly in Europe. Just like Moldova or the countries of the Western Balkans. We should allow them to come closer to our Union: by enabling their citizens to benefit directly from our democratic space and single market, by having them participate in some of our institutions, by showing their citizens they are Europe as much as we are.

Let us take this bold step for a European Union that takes responsibility for its whole neighborhood, actually for its whole continent. A truly inclusive Europe. For some of them, the ultimate goal will be integration. That will not happen overnight, but it is our job to create the right conditions for these countries to become part of a political unity of open and free democracies. This European unification will only be successful if it makes our societies more open, tolerant and free. Without this mission, Europe means nothing.

- Eine Churchillianische Wende -

Ladies and gentlemen,

My reading of the current situation is that it is time to let go of our European naivety. We have to do what the Winston Churchill did in the summer of 1911: change tack.

The young sir Winston was one of the leaders of a political group who called themselves “the economists”. He believed that entering into a naval race against Germany was unnecessary. Until Kaiser Wilhelm sent a German warship into the Port of Agadir. The German decision struck Churchill as a bolt of lightning. It proved the German Reich was not out for peace, but for war. It made him change his mind overnight. When appointed Lord Admiral, he built up the Royal Navy that would be decisive in freeing the European continent.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are past our Agadir moment.

Our Agadir moment was when Putin annexed Crimea and occupied the Donbass back in 2014. That’s when he started his war in Europe. That’s when we missed the chance to stop him. What we need in Europe today is a *Churchillianische Wende*

When faced with a decisive moment, we need to take decisive action. The generations who came before us did not build up Europe merely for us to consume it. They left it with an implicit understanding that we would continue to build. A Europe that inspires and protects people. A Europe that shows leadership.

We are not used to that. We are used to leading from behind.

It is time now to right our backs and stand up. Stand up for our fragile values of humanity and democracy.

A few weeks ago, my Estonian colleague Kaja Kallas gave a speech here in Berlin. She is a dear friend and she represents new leadership in Europe. When she talks about her experience living under Soviet rule, her face always becomes a bit more serious, and her tone hardens. “I can tell you, it was not nice”, is what she always says. Four words that communicate a traumatic experience with autocracy. But four words that also communicate determination. Never again.

Kaja, Estonia and the Baltic states prove you do not have to big in order to be a leader. It is the power of our conviction that counts. That is the beauty of our Union. In our diversity we find unity. Our differences of opinion do not end in bloodshed but in a consensus that makes all of us stronger. This is what makes us attractive. This is why countries and people are knocking on our door to get in. We do not bind peoples and countries to us through force, but through the power of our ideas.

That used to be different in Europe’s past. We have broken with our past. We have learned from our past.

We must never allow anyone to take this away from us.

- Restoring the European Dream -

And, finally, let us not forget: this fight for freedom begins at home.

In our societies, in our parliaments, too, political forces lean towards Putin and his ideology of fear and

hate. Racists and communists. We have come too far to let our freedoms be taken away by conservatives on the far left and the far right who jeopardize the fundamental equality of every individual person.

We have spent far too much time on a social welfare state to let it be destroyed by communists. And we have built too many bridges to let them be blown up by nationalists with anti-European agendas that will make us poorer, not richer.

We must not let a day pass without exposing them.

But above all: we must deliver. Europe and all European countries must deliver on the promise that we will protect people, especially in these turbulent times. So that people feel safe and supported to spread their wings. To engage with each other. And to build a society where everyone is free and where we never give up on each other.

We have to restore the European dream.

The belief that our children and grandchildren will be better off than we are. That when everyone makes his or her contribution to our society, we all progress. That progress is there not only for a small group, but for everyone - without discrimination.

That is what liberal democracy stands for.

That is what Europe stands for.

And that is what we will never stop fighting for.

I thank you.

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