

Today is an important day for European unity.

This morning, the European Parliament had the honour of hosting President Zelenskyy - a true example of the bravery, courage and resilience of the Ukrainian people. President Zelenskyy spoke from our chamber, but his words reverberated throughout Europe. It was a strong message of unity and a reminder that the battle for Ukraine is not just one for territory - but also one in defence of our shared values.

It will be one-year since Russia illegally invaded sovereign and independent Ukraine. We can be proud of our full solidarity with the Ukrainian people. But the war in Ukraine remains on-going. We cannot allow war fatigue to set in - that is what the Kremlin is hoping for. It wants to exhaust our systems and our patience.

Ukraine still needs more support.

Ukraine needs weapons. In this next phase of war, more heavy armour will be required. Tanks, jets and long-range defence systems must be considered and here we must move quickly. There is no time for complacency.

That is how we can help achieve peace. Peace with dignity. Peace with freedom. Peace with justice.

Ukraine is Europe. Last year, we took the historic decision to grant EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. It was not just a symbolic act, but a firm acknowledgement that Ukraine's place is within the European Union. We must be ready to follow through with our word. Ukraine has been making remarkable headway when it comes to the pace of its reforms. And I am hopeful that accession negotiations could begin as soon as possible - provided that Ukraine fulfils all necessary criteria.

This last year has also shown us that we can come together to address the challenges posed by large movements of people. We have shown that we can do this.

Year after year, legislature after legislature, migration has been a reoccurring challenge for us all, in spite of this, we have not managed to agree on a long-term sustainable approach.

I know that it is tempting for each of us to go at it alone. Autocrats know this. Cynics bank on it. It is precisely in these difficult moments, must we resist the urge the most.

My point is one: there are challenges that necessitate a European response. And even if complex and multifaceted we have - and we can - find agreements that go far beyond the immediate.

With the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, we already have a plan:

- There has been a lot of discussion recently about strengthening our external borders - and rightly so. But we should not forget that we can already begin to address these issues, while preserving the integrity of the Schengen area, with an agreement on the Asylum Procedures Regulation and Screening.
- We have been speaking about resolving the issues of secondary movements and effective solidarity. But the answers to these debates can come with agreements on Eurodac and the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management.
- And we have also been talking about the external dimension and our efforts with key third countries. And this discussion is already foreseen within the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management. Here we also need to talk more about returns. Too few people who should and could be returned safely still are not. That is difficult to explain to our public. We can do better. We can ensure our resources are dedicated to those who need them the most.
- The Migration Pact can even go beyond all these issues. In its holistic form it also accounts for situations of crises, force majeure and other unforeseen circumstances.

That is why we cannot shift our focus away from: finalising the reform of the Asylum and Migration legislative framework before the end of this legislative period.

This is the commitment the European Parliament and the five rotating Presidencies in the Council, made to European citizens back in September of last year. Any debate outside this framework will only seek to delay - or even hinder - this reform.

We have no time to lose. It is imperative that negotiations begin between the two co-legislators within the next months, to allow enough time to strike the right balance and find an approach that is humane and fair with those seeking protection, that is firm with those who are not eligible and that is strong with those who exploit the most vulnerable on our planet.

And you know as well as I do, that migration is just one of the challenges that Europe is facing at the moment. In this time of global instability: of high inflation, costly energy prices, struggling industries and painful household bills - we need to build on our biggest asset.

This year, our Single Market marks its 30th anniversary. In this time, we have seen more opportunities for people, businesses and consumers than we could have ever imagined. Being the world's largest single democratic market has strengthened our place in the world. Even in times where our European way of doing things is being put into question. We are still setting global standards. Because they know that our way of open societies and open markets works. Europe has far more to offer than we give ourselves credit for.

We can build on this. Let us speed up investment in Europe, to put the European economy back on a stable path of growth and to make us even more competitive. We do not need to reinvent the wheel - NextGenerationEU funding is still ready and available. Together with a revision of the MFF that will allow us to redistribute funds into tranches that were less of a priority when we were negotiating it.

Just last week, it was reported that energy and electricity firms made record-breaking profits in 2022. Now is the time to double down on the idea of a windfall tax.

I know that a decision has previously been taken but when we are looking at around 40 billion Euro worth of additional revenues for one energy firm alone, at a time where citizens and businesses need support, it is clear to me that there are far too many still falling through the cracks.

The latest forecasts show that the European Union will be able to deploy more renewable energy in the next 5 years than it has in the past 20. The need for this transition is not a threat, but an opportunity.

This morning, Parliament adopted its position on the EU Gas Regulation and on the last big file of the Fit for 55 package, the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive. We are on the last stages to prepare the regulatory framework needed for the transition we agreed on in the European Climate Law.

What the European Union should be doing is trying to gain a competitive edge globally by sticking to its democratic values and by pursuing our climate agenda with our tailor-made regulatory framework.

And in doing so, what I said in December still holds true: we must avoid the slippery slope of who reaches the bottom of the protectionist race first. We do not need to fence ourselves in. Our economy has grown over the years precisely because we stood for the opposite.

Our way of doing things, works.

This also holds true in our pursuit towards increasing the integrity, independence and accountability of our institutions. On this, I am happy to inform you that yesterday evening we adopted our first measures and I am confident that we will continue to re-build trust in the Parliament and in our project.

Finally let me pay tribute to Nicos Anastasiades - who will soon hand over the reigns of Cyprus after 10 years as President. Thank you for commitment to our European project, to peace and for all you have done for regional stability in the last decade. Your successor has big shoes to fill.

Thank you.