

Speech by Ingrida Šimonytė, Prime Minister of Lithuania

EPP Group Bureau Meeting

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Dear Manfred,

Dear Colleagues,

Dear members [and friends] of the EPP family in this room and on-line,

I am glad to be here with you today. More importantly, today and every day, I am happy to be part of the EPP family.

It not just feels good and empowering – to be a member of the EU’s oldest and largest political group. It grants a sense of belonging to a community sharing similar worldviews and working together to achieve common goals.

The very same can be said about Europe. A community of countries and people – diverse; some – relatively distant. Yet united by much more than just a mere geographical coincidence. Bound together by our values. Sharing this very sense of belonging. Of being part of something bigger – of being European.

It isn’t easy to define what this means. What Europe is. We all remember the attempts at finding an answer while debating on the EU Constitution two decades ago.

Back then, we ended up dropping the idea of the EU Constitution and adopting the Lisbon Treaty instead. Many sceptics within and outside the EU took this as evidence to claim that we can’t even agree on who we are. And hence – are bound to fail at any strategic debate in the future.

I couldn’t disagree more.

The most important things – and the strongest of feelings – are usually the hardest to define. What is love? God? Freedom? The meaning of life? Endless discussions might never bring to a satisfying answer. But when you have it, when you feel it – you know what it is. And you sure know what it isn’t.

Peace is not war. Freedom is not slavery. Ignorance is not strength. I know that very well – despite decades of occupation by the worse-than-Orwellian soviet regime, which tried hard to convince my family and our nation otherwise.

Europe is a place where we belong. The EU is a community of freedom and values. That’s what Lithuania saw while observing from the outside. And that’s the Europe, the EU, I see – and believe in – today, as my country has been a member state for 17 years.

As we've returned to the debate on the Future of Europe, we should not give in to the pessimists' prediction that we'll just end up agreeing to disagree. In fact, there is no disagreement, really, on what future we must build for Europe.

Europe of the future must be free, secure, and prosperous. And so, too, each and every of its citizens must be able to feel. An area where science, businesses, and talents flourish. Where the heritage is preserved, the history – owned and reflected upon. And the future is being built every day by empowered dreamers and innovators.

In global affairs, Europe must be relevant, to say the very least. To put it more bluntly, Europe must remain a centre of gravity – cultural, political, and economic, – as it has been for centuries, even though new powers kept and will keep emerging elsewhere in the world.

Is there a leader or a citizen of a European country who would wish the opposite for the future of Europe? I don't think so.

Now, as before, at the centre of the debate on the Future of Europe, is not the question of what we want to achieve but of how we get there.

I say, we get there, most importantly, by staying true to ourselves. By never compromising on the values that define and unite us. Freedom, peace, democracy, rule of law, human rights, and human dignity. By staying committed to defending them, peacefully, wherever they are violated.

It is frustrating to see the ambition of the EU policies sometimes reduced to searching for what's called “the lowest common denominator” in mathematics. Yet as politicians, all we need to do is replace the notion of “lowest” with “underlying” or “fundamental” in our hearts and minds.

To put our fundamental values at the very core of our joint decisions and let them guide us. We'll see so many dilemmas disappear.

Can we remain true to ourselves if we abandon the people of Belarus struggling for their basic rights and freedoms? Can we honestly say we live up to our values if one day we choose to forget Alexei Navalny in a Russian prison or the people of Ukraine losing their lives for Donbas? Can we come to the point where we trade Ukrainian Crimea for whatever bargaining chip the Kremlin might offer us?

Can we keep delaying negotiations with the Western Balkan countries after numerous promises that their future is within the EU? Can we leave behind those who helped us in Afghanistan? Do people of Taiwan and Hongkong deserve support in their strive to live in democracies?

As long as we remain true to ourselves, the answers are clear and there's no multiple choice.

Yes, a price tag is often attached to taking a moral stance. Sometimes it's calculable – as in cases of economic sanctions. Sometimes exceeding any reasonable expectations – because there are no limits to dictators' imagination. Lithuania learned it first-hand, when Lukashenka decided to forcefully land the Ryanair plane and take over a hundred EU citizens as hostages in Minsk just to extract Raman Pratashevich. Or when he chose to use irregular migration as a hybrid weapon against my country, our neighbouring Latvia and Poland, and the whole of the EU.

But whatever price we are or might be paying in the future for choosing the right side of history, it cannot compare to the cost of losing (or worse even – trading in) our moral compass. For then we'd become “a community of those who have nothing in common”, – if I may borrow this spot-on definition from Alphonso Lingis, an American philosopher of Lithuanian descent. Then the tactic of “divide and rule”, employed by our foes in the past and today, would fully display its terrifying results. Leaving us scattered, lost, alone.

And standing alone is not an option. If anyone ever doubted it, numerous, mounting challenges – from economic crises to the current pandemic – have given us a lesson that we need stronger, not weaker EU. The EU that can overcome any crisis. The EU that can even beat cancer.

From economic recovery plans to vaccine sharing, from green certificates to border control – it is the EU we end up leaning on. Which brings me to the second precondition of building the Future of Europe our people deserve. We must stop searching for a scapegoat in Brussels, regardless of how convenient it might be in our domestic politics. And start to work harder (and faster) to improve and strengthen the EU mechanisms and policies through adaptive leadership.

Yes, I'm a prime minister delegated by a conservative party. But for me, conservatism is not about clinging to the past at any cost, ignoring the transformations in our societies, new achievements in science, or emerging security threats. We shouldn't try to fix what's not broken. Yet at the same time, we shouldn't try to preserve what is impossible to preserve.

The EU must learn from its experiences and adjust to ever changing challenges and their contexts. Be it a blurred line between freedom of speech and disinformation, or an abuse of our migration and asylum policies by weaponizing human smuggling. We must review our policies and our *acquis* and find new mechanisms and solutions. To be able to preserve our fundamental values but not let adversaries turn them into our biggest vulnerabilities.

Finally, we learned some time ago that the climate change, pandemics, terrorism, or cyber-crimes can only be tackled by uniting efforts globally. So, we must work harder to strengthen and expand our partnerships outside the EU. With NATO and

our closest allies like the US, Canada, and the UK. With our partners in the European Economic Area and Switzerland. With Israel, Japan, Australia, and South Korea. With other countries that share our values or at least do not attempt to undermine them.

We must strengthen our engagement in EU's Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods. With the Western Balkans and Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine – countries that look at us as an example and aspire for deeper integration and future EU membership. Be it for the very pragmatic reason of expanding the European area of security and prosperity. Or for a moral obligation to not shut the doors to the nations seeking to be part of our community, even if their governments aren't successful or fast enough in fulfilling their dreams.

An advanced and prosperous island of Atlantis might be a beautiful myth – but a myth, nevertheless. Resurrected by the Renaissance authors as a utopia. But in Plato's original writings – defeated by more superior Athens and sunken by its own unmeasured ambition.

A sobering story that never happened is still a good reminder that we can't expect to create our own little paradise, wall-in (although some walls need to be built apparently) and hope to preserve this heaven on earth from the global challenges.

We must be able to act globally. But at the same time, we should also do our best at home. To try and build a free, secure, and prosperous Europe for the future of our people. There's nothing utopic about agreeing on that. Or making it happen.