

Opening speech by President von der Leyen at the ceremony awarding the International Peace of Westphalia Prize to French President, Emmanuel Macron

Münster, 28 May 2024

'Check against delivery'

Dear President Steinmeier, dear Frank

Dear Ms Büdenbender,

Dear President Macron, dear Emmanuel, dear Brigitte,

Dear Ministers Nowacka, Paus and Schulze,

Dear Minister-President Wüst, dear Hendrik,

Dear Ministers of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia,

Dear Members of the European Parliament, the German Bundestag and the North Rhine-Westphalia State Parliament,

Dear Mayor Lewe,

Dear Mr Zinkann,

Dear guests,

Let me start by thanking the 'Wirtschaftliche Gesellschaft für Westfalen und Lippe'. What an honour to open this ceremony! Westphalia is the birthplace of modern Europe. The Thirty Years War was one of the most brutal conflicts in human history. It claimed the lives of more than five million people.

But amid a sea of suffering, something revolutionary took place. Here in Westphalia 235 delegations from all over Europe came together. They argued and debated for more than two years until they finally developed a vision of how a lasting peace in Europe could look. For the first time, Europeans agreed upon a set of rules that were to apply without distinction to all countries on our continent. That was the birth of modern international law. All states should enjoy equal dignity and rights, regardless of whether they were big or small, Catholic or Protestant, old or newly founded.

To this day this is a cornerstone of international peace. It is what we call the rules-based order. That is the great gift that Westphalia has given not only to Europe, but also to the whole world. That is the heritage that Europe must not only maintain, but also protect and preserve. That is why the prize founded by the 'Wirtschaftliche Gesellschaft für Westfalen und Lippe' still remains so important today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In today's world, the principles that the prize upholds are more important than ever. Putin has brought war back to Europe. When his tanks rolled into Ukraine, that was at the same time an attack on the Charter of the United Nations established at the end of the Second World War. It is also an attack on the European security order as well. It is an attack on the idea of national sovereignty. It is an attack on the understanding that violence may not be used to move borders. And that is precisely why Putin and his cold-blooded calculations must fail! If his imperialistic war were to succeed, that would pose an existential threat to the whole of Europe.

President Macron,

that was a central point in your impressive speech at the Sorbonne. Ukraine's sovereignty and

territorial integrity is in the security interests of all Europeans. The people of Ukraine are defending their country and our security. We have to mobilise the full force of the European Union, so that Ukraine can stand up to its aggressor. A just and lasting peace has to be founded on international law and strong security guarantees for Ukraine. And we have to do our part for this.

As you said yesterday in Dresden, *“Nous sommes à un moment inédit de notre histoire où nous devons penser notre défense et notre sécurité par nous-mêmes et pour nous-mêmes en tant qu’Européens”*. We are at an unprecedented point in our history, where we have to rethink our security and defence by ourselves and for ourselves as Europeans. Today Europe is moving towards more sovereignty in the realm of defence.

The past few years have clearly shown us that if we want to defend peace on our continent, we have to develop our own European might. And that is precisely why it is right and proper that defence budgets in Europe are growing and we are investing more in our defence industry.

For this reason, work on a European defence union is also appropriate. The initiative for an air defence shield is an illustration of this new European mission. This began with Chancellor Scholz’s speech in Prague. You, Mr President, opened the door for a European discussion in your speech at the Sorbonne. And a few days ago Prime Ministers Tusk und Mitsotakis took up the baton. A European Union is only truly sovereign if it can defend itself. This is precisely what people expect from Europe. *‘Une Europe qui protège’*, as you said. A Europe that protects is what our democracies need too.

Their opponents want not only to move physical borders with force, they also want to move borders in our minds. They are using not only drones, tanks and missiles, but also bots, trolls and fake accounts. And they are doing this systematically and on an industrial scale. They are testing our resilience every day and at every level. Whether this takes the form of migrants from Yemen appearing in their thousands in Finland’s border forests. Or border buoys disappearing in Narva. Or cyberattacks against democratic institutions. I could give many other examples, but the aim is the same: it is to rattle our sense of security and undermine social harmony. The ultimate aim is to destroy the European ideal.

And because everything is at stake, we need to think bigger and broader. We have shown in recent years that if we stand together we can move mountains. We withstood the pandemic, we resisted Putin’s extortion, we overcame a massive energy crisis because we stood together. 27 countries, 450 million people.

We have to face these challenges with that same attitude and that same inner strength. We have enjoyed decades of peace. We have overcome Europe’s deep divisions. We have built up a unique economic strength. And now our democracy and our freedom is at stake. The younger generation will never forgive us if we do not face this challenge resolutely. If we do not defend the foundations of Europe with courage and clarity. And in that spirit: congratulations to the winners. Thank you for your efforts.

Long live Europe!