

Europe Day Reception

Thursday 9 May 2019

Speech by H.E. Mr Michael Matthiessen

Ambassador of the European Union

Guten Abend, bonsoir, buonasera, buna saira, good evening!

Signora la Presidente del Consiglio Nazionale

Mesdames et Messieurs

Liebe Freunde Europas

---- **Introduction** ----

Wir feiern heute in der ganzen Europäischen Union den Europatag. Damit gedenken wir der Rede des Französischen Aussenministers Robert Schuman vom 9. Mai 1950. Schuman präsentierte die Vision eines Europas, das durch konkrete Zusammenarbeit die historischen Feindschaften überwindet und einen stabilen Frieden in Wohlstand schafft. Diese Vision leben wir heute in der Europäischen Union !

La Journée de l'Europe n'est pas célébrée seulement à l'intérieur de l'Union européenne, mais dans le monde entier – par les 140 délégations de l'UE dans les pays tiers. Avec mon épouse et mes collègues Ambassadeurs des Etats membres je me réjouis de célébrer cette Journée en Suisse également. Merci d'être venus si nombreux!

Sono felice di essere in Svizzera. Tra molte altre cose ne apprezzo la multiculturalità. Essere confrontato ogni giorno a diverse lingue e mentalità allarga gli orizzonti e apre nuove prospettive. "Uniti nella diversità" è lo slogan sia della Svizzera sia dell'Unione europea. Anche in questo senso la Svizzera è un paese profondamente europeo.

---- **On the European Union** ----

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me first thank the Romanian duo, Adrian Florescu at the violin and Bogdan Mihăilescu at the guitar, who accompanied us with wonderful European music during the first part of this Europe Day. They will play again after the speeches.

My thanks of course also go to the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and to Ambassador Vlad Vasiliu for this cultural contribution to our common Europe Day.

Let me already now also thank all those who have contributed to the organization and the success of this Europe Day. Both to Ambassador colleagues from Member States, my staff of the EU Delegation, and the staff of Kursaal: Thank you very much!

As we today commemorate the anniversary of the Schuman declaration here in Bern, EU leaders are united in the beautiful city of Sibiu (Hermannstadt) in Romania. This informal Summit of 27 EU leaders on Europe Day signals that the EU-27 are united in pursuing the European project and in working together for a stronger and more democratic Union in an increasingly uncertain world. Leaders have earlier today adopted the Sibiu declaration on the future of Europe, containing 10 commitments setting out the strategic direction of the EU in the years to come.

Today, 69 years after the Schuman declaration and 30 years after the fall of the iron curtain, Europe still needs the European Union.

The world around us is changing. It is becoming more fractured, multipolar and unsettled. New global powers are emerging, which do not share the same values of freedom and democracy that we Europeans do. The rules-based multilateral order is under pressure and the primacy of national interests is resurging.

More than ever, if we want to preserve our European way of life and reinforce Europe's global influence, EU Member States must act together and cooperate with like-minded countries sharing our values.

After a challenging period, Europe is bouncing back. The EU's economy has now grown for six consecutive years. There are 240 million people at work – more than ever before. Since 2013, unemployment has continuously declined, even though it unfortunately remains high in some Member States.

Indeed, there is an international demand for Europe and the EU, not least as a trading partner. In the last five years, new trade agreements between the EU and 15 third countries entered into force, those with Japan and Canada being the most important ones. And more are in the pipeline!

Being the largest trading power in the world, the EU is able to set standards - such as with the General Data Protection

Regulation (GDPR), which inspire many countries worldwide and shape the digital economy. At UN level and in other international fora, the EU takes the lead in addressing global challenges: fighting climate change, promoting peace and sustainable development.

There is also a high demand for Europe as a model of society and for the European Union as a political pattern of establishing long-term peace, stability and prosperity through economic and political integration.

A week ago, on 1 May, we celebrated the 15th anniversary of the EU's enlargement to 10 Member States in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. Three further states joined a few years later. The EU enlargement is a success story! These Member States are gradually catching up economically and many of them have impressive growth rates. The European continent has become more stable and prosperous and our societies interwoven. The iron curtain is history!

Currently, the EU is exporting stability and promoting political, economic and social transformation in the Western Balkans, by offering countries in this region a prospect to join the European project.

In the meantime one Member State, the United Kingdom, has decided by referendum in 2016, to leave the European Union. We regret this decision by the British people, but we respect it.

In the remaining 27 Member States, Brexit has in fact sharpened the citizens' awareness of the many benefits of the European Union: open borders, free movement of people, goods & services, a digital single market with no roaming charges, a common research space, and many other advantages. Recent opinion polls show that the popularity of the European Union among the citizens of almost all remaining 27 Member States has gone up considerably in the last couple of years.

This is the main message conveyed by the EU leaders in Sibiu today: the EU-27 stand together and are committed to continue the path of European integration! Only by finding strength in unity, will Europe be able to shape the course of world events, including its own future.

In this context, we are approaching the European elections, the world's largest transnational elections! In two weeks from now, from 23 to 26 May, some 400 million EU citizens in voting age are called upon to elect their representatives for the next five years in the European Parliament.

Together with the Council of Ministers, representing the Member States, the European Parliament forms the EU's legislative. The Parliament decides on all legislative acts of the EU, including on most international treaties. The new Commission, the EU's executive, which will take over at the end of the year, needs to be confirmed by the European Parliament. The Parliament also co-decides on the EU's budget, and thus plays a crucial role in shaping the future of the European Union.

In other words: The European elections are the most important moment in the EU's democratic life!

Particularly in Switzerland, where I often hear that the political system here is the only really democratic one, I would like to say:

The European Union and its Member States are also democracies!

Switzerland is indirectly concerned by the European elections. A quarter of the Swiss population, including hundreds of thousands Swiss dual nationals, hold an EU passport. I encourage these citizens to make use of their democratic right to vote and to shape Europe's future.

---- On EU-Swiss relations ----

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me conclude with some remarks on EU-Swiss relations.

For this year's Europe Day we chose this venue at Kursaal in order to have a splendid view over the city of Bern and the Bernese Alps. And, as you will have seen, we branded the invitation as well as our communication material with a panorama. Why? - **Because I want you to look at the big picture of the EU-Swiss partnership – and to look at its future.**

In our day to day life, we tend to focus on our particular interests, and to concentrate on problems – some real, some hypothetical. This often blurs the vision of the broader landscape and for the many opportunities in our relationship.

I often hear – in Switzerland but also in EU Member States – that the EU has many shortcomings. Indeed, nobody is perfect - and we are facing challenges.

But in all honesty: Is there a continent on this earth or a period in history where the Swiss citizens would feel safer and be more prosperous than in the centre of today's Europe? Switzerland is today surrounded by four democratic and peaceful EU neighbours, as well as by the EEA partner Liechtenstein. Thanks to Schengen, Switzerland has open borders to its neighbours and has numerous opportunities for business, cultural and human exchanges.

So... I am quite convinced the Swiss would not wish to change continent or historical period.

Let's look at the big picture:

The EU-Swiss partnership has deep historical roots, we share geography, history, languages and values. Our cooperation is based on over 100 bilateral agreements. You know the impressive figures on commercial exchanges and human ties resulting from these agreements. I will not recall them tonight. Suffice to say that the European Union is by far the largest trading partner of Switzerland and the Swiss Confederation is the third largest trading partner of the EU. And a study published yesterday shows that Switzerland is the country in Europe which profits most from the EU's internal market!

But let's be clear: we are now at a crossroad. The current bilateral agreements have reached their limit. To consolidate the bilateral approach and extend it further we need the Institutional Framework Agreement! This agreement has been negotiated for almost five years and the agreed text is now on the table. The agreement will make our partnership even stronger by consolidating the bilateral approach and by opening the access to further sectors of the EU's internal market to Switzerland. There is still a great untapped potential there!

Last but not least, let's also look at the global context: European values and interests are under pressure. The more stable the relations among us Europeans are, both Member States and Non-Member-States, the better can we defend our values and interests worldwide.

For all these reasons, I sincerely hope that we will soon have a positive decision by Switzerland on the Institutional Framework Agreement. This will reinforce the EU-Swiss relations and contribute to a stronger and more self-reliant Europe!

Thank you very much!

---- End ----