

## Acceptance Speech - Schwarzkopf Europe Award 2017

Speech - **City** Berlin - **Country** Germany - **Date** 24/04/2017

I am honoured and delighted to accept this award not just on my own behalf but on behalf of all of my colleagues at the office of the European Ombudsman who work so hard to carry out our mission on behalf of all of the citizens of the European Union. I thank the Foundation for the honour and I wish it well as it continues its vital work in promoting European understanding and by inspiring young people to take on the leadership roles that are so badly needed in Europe at a time of such challenge for the Union. We are a small office – just 80 people – but with a big mandate and that is to help make sure that the institutions, agencies and bodies of the EU achieve the highest standards when it comes to dealing with the 500 million Europeans who depend so much on the work that they daily carry out. Ombudsman is a Swedish word and a Swedish invention dating back over 200 years when an exiled Swedish king appointed an official to make sure that his people were being treated well in his absence. It describes someone who stands midway between the people and the state making sure that the powerful state does not oppress the individual citizen through the unjust or unfair application of its laws and regulations. In that way it complements the work of the courts allowing individuals to complain to an independent body, usually at no cost, on matters that aren't just about the legality of an action but rather about its fairness and justice. Public administration can seem like an abstract even dull topic but in my work I try to make sure that what we do has relevance, that what we achieve makes a real difference not just to an individual complainant but to people right across the union. Since my election by the European Parliament in 2013 we have worked across a diverse range of important issues including the transparency of trade negotiations, the right to see the clinical trial results of pharmaceutical companies, the right to know what happens when new EU laws are being negotiated, the transparency of Brussels lobbying, the monitoring of the so called revolving door -when public officials move to the private sector - the proper regulation of pesticide and chemical testing and many other vital matters. We are currently working to help make sure that the Brexit negotiations will be as transparent as possible given the impact that those talks will have on every single one of us in this Union and even beyond its shores. We accept access to documents cases in that area but we also work with the Commission and the Council reminding them of their obligations to be transparent in their dealings with everyone involved in negotiating this critical Brexit deal. But this evening I want briefly to reflect on the wider, much debated, much contested issue of the future of that Union. I don't have to tell this audience what the challenges are, whether internal to our Union, in our neighbourhood or even across the Atlantic. It has become even a cliché to call them existential, but in many ways that is precisely what they appear to be. Elections in this country and in France this year will bring us to the next chapter of the story but no one can possibly tell



us how this part of our story, this part of the story of Europe, will possibly end. Last night's results in France give some grounds for optimism but certainly not for complacency. It has also become a cliché at points in time such as this one to quote the Irish poet WB Yeats from the poem *The Second Coming* when he writes: Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere: anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity I prefer another Irish poet, Seamus Heaney and the hopeful, beautiful lines he wrote in 2004 on the occasion of the accession of ten new member states into the Union. Heaney wrote: So on a day when newcomers appear Let it be a homecoming and let us speak The unstrange word, as it behoves us here, Move lips, move minds and make new meanings flare Like ancient beacons signalling, peak to peak, From middle sea to north sea, shining clear Yet the poetry of a single moment, a single point in time when all seems hopeful when the future seems set, when everyone seems pointed in a single ,shared direction is frequently just that, a moment, swiftly overtaken by the prose of life and of circumstance, of politics and trade, of the failure to root out old and destructive cultures , of the rise of individuals intent on seduction, the seduction of those who they would have believe that the solutions to their problems lie in the darker shades of nationalism, of protectionism of the exclusion of all but their own race and creed. The creation of the union was for some a poetic act, an act of redemption an act of hope, and fundamentally an act of love but it was and is also about trade and defence, tariffs, security, cross border migration, that most unpoetic stuff of daily life and of international co-operation. Maintaining the idealism and the vision of the early years of the union, keeping the poetry alive and meaningful is the challenge. But despite the dystopian image of the EU conjured up by those who oppose its idealism and its reality, it has undeniably lived up to the essence of its promise, has brought what was unimaginable to a point where so many now take it for granted, as commonplace,. And while all of that is problematic because perhaps we no longer cherish what we have as much as we should, is it not wonderful that we now can take for granted, as part of the banal prose of our life, that which was denied to so many of our parents and grandparents? This amazing city of Berlin alone encapsulates the full trajectory of that history. What few could even think to dream of has now become just normal daily life. On Saturday I visited the Panorama, the incredible installation by Yadegar Asisi that lets you imagine that you are standing on a balcony in West Berlin gazing across Checkpoint Charlie to the east before the wall came down in 1989. At the entrance I read his words as he reflected on the critical role of such historical memory for this and for every generation. He wrote: ""We no longer think about freedom. We are fortunate to live in a society in which freedom of expression is firmly anchored in everyday life and in which there are no borders. "History has often demonstrated that things can change overnight – for the better as well as for the worse. Nothing we have achieved will remain with us on its own accord. Although each generation harbours the danger of losing supposedly secure things, it can, however also stabilise and further develop what has already been achieved. Asisi then speaks of the need to set forth into a future where difference is honoured and accommodated and ends :." If we do not succeed in this, then the next walls will not be long in coming." The British referendum certainly changed the future of the British – and particularly of its young generation – and only time will tell whether that change is for better or for worse and how the resonance of that single vote – that overnight change - will be felt far beyond its shores. As an Irish citizen, I have lived for most of my life on the outer edge of the union. When the British leave, the Union will be even more geographically



displaced. The problems, both political and economic, that that will cause for Ireland will be immense but there are few voices raised in favour of following the UK out. Every country and every generation experiences the EU differently but there are still sufficient of us of a certain age in Ireland to know the benefits that have come our way, to appreciate how the sharing of capacity, of the pooling of sovereignty, of the exposure to different, frequently higher value systems in the area of human rights and the environment for example, have gifted to the Irish citizens that which our own governments either could not or would not on their own. Last month, in Brussels, I presented the first ever European Ombudsman awards for good administration. We received 90 entries from the EU institutions, agencies and bodies from right across the Union. For me, two winners in particular stood out. One was an initiative between the Commission and the Polish authorities in the heavily polluted region of Malopolska in which they jointly succeeded in funding a project that is now expected greatly to lower air pollution levels and therefore improve the health of Malopolska's millions of citizens. The other was another collaboration this time bringing together EU wide expertise in rare diseases from over 300 hospitals in 24 member states to enable faster development of treatments and possibly even cures for the over 30 million Europeans living with a rare disease. In both instances, the enlightened sharing of information and expertise, the pooling of a particular kind of sovereignty, steered by our common European institutions, will lead to better outcomes than had the individual member states been left to do it on their own. And that is what can and should bind us together, our shared humanity, our shared belief in the benefits of enlightened collaboration. To conclude, we live in difficult times, but we also live in a time of increasing civic and political engagement and activism by young people such as yourselves. We see the inspiring 'Pulse of Europe' gatherings in many German cities and elsewhere in Europe based on the very practical idea that Europe isn't going to save itself. Many of you have known nothing other than the EU and your involvement in this organisation speaks of your idealism and your capacity to show and to demonstrate leadership and I wish you well in that. Thank you.