

## Vision for Europe

Speech - **City** Prague - **Country** Czechia - **Date** 20/06/2018

**Prague, 20th June 2018**

Thank you Minister, for the kind introduction.

It is a wonderful honour to be here this evening and to be receiving the **Vision for Europe** award on behalf of the office of the European Ombudsman. It is a particular honour to be receiving it in the wake of the two distinguished former winners, Professor Wessels and Professor Garton Ash and on behalf of my colleagues and myself, I thank you.

Thank you also to the organisers of this valuable conference, the Institute for European Policy, the Institute of International Relations, and the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

To receive the award in this exquisite setting in this beautiful city adds an extra dimension to this honour. The building in which we are based in Strasbourg is actually named after former Czech President Vaclav Havel, and so in a sense this is a form of homecoming.

We are a small office but with a big mandate and that is essentially to make sure that European citizens are treated with fairness and justice by those who administer the work of the EU institutions, from the big and powerful Commission or Council, to the smallest of the EU agencies.

But those of you here who work in the political or public sphere, or in any area of life with a profound impact on the lives of people, will know that we can shape our mandates in a way that determines whether we dream big or we dream small.

As European Ombudsman – and as an Irish woman from a generation of Irishwomen that achieved much of its liberty to engage in the public space through membership of the European Union – I try to use my mandate and the human capacity of my office to the greatest extent possible to play a positive role in creating a Union that delivers what is so powerfully promised through its Treaties and through the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

My role is to match the fine rhetoric with the practical actions of the institutions as it is precisely when the gap appears between words and actions that people begin to lose trust and to doubt.



The debate about the future of Europe is essentially about trust – whether trust in the EU project and intent, trust in the political will of member states, trust in new and charismatic leaders, and trust in liberal democracy or trust in a return to older political and cultural roots.

Throughout Europe we are seeing citizens making very different choices influenced yes by their own personal beliefs and ambitions but essentially by the political narrative – credible or sustainable or not - that has succeeded in becoming the dominant one.

What to choose and who to trust is the dilemma that faces every citizen. The political challenge is to be honest about the consequences of those choices and mindful of the power of the words that are used to attract people's trust and confidence.

The particular history of the Czech Republic has allowed its writers acutely to discern the frustrations and paradoxes of this age. Vaclav Havel once expressed his frustration with politics itself, with his inability to control it, to shape it, to bring it to a lasting conclusion, How much easier it is he said for a work man building a bridge or a road who can pause for his break and see something created, something that will continue to its final fixed end and which will not change for a very long time.

The Czech writer Radka Denemarkova told an interviewer some years ago of her frustration with perspectives on the world that she believed are no longer valid.

*She said: “ We bandy about words like democracy, equality, intolerance and tolerance, words that have become bleached of meaning. People still think in terms of Right and Left, of dissidents and communists, East and West. As if they lived in the past. But none of that is true anymore and hasn't been true for a long time! ...life flows along a very different river-bed. ”*

Some of you may agree, others may believe that the past remains inescapable that it still lives with us even if we try to move on. The long ago events in my own country, when it was divided North and South, Irish and British, emerge now fresh as ever through Brexit as the Irish border remains the single biggest barrier to a negotiations breakthrough.

And in this part of the Union, it can be memories from the Second World War or the Soviet era which remind us again, that as we search for a modern EU to bind us together, that we continue to feel the resonance and pull of the past.

So the future of Europe perhaps runs along a familiar river bed. The great success of the EU was to – not destroy that bed – but at least to alter its course in a way that brought all of its tributaries together harmoniously. Development has not been even or perhaps always just or fair but the great majority of EU citizens have seen their lives and life prospects enormously improved through EU membership and a young generation takes now for granted the peace of the last 70 years.

Last week, I visited the former home of Robert Schuman, the French statesman and one of the primary architects of what eventually became our contemporary European Union.



Throughout the building were black and white photographs of the many meetings and summits and conferences that preceded its birth with representatives of those states just so recently at war with each other, now tentatively coming together.

One of my colleagues said to me “ *Did you notice how nervous they looked in those pictures, how scared they must have been* ”. Nowadays, such civilised European meetings are commonplace, and while at times of political tension, some leaders might look nervous, no one is any longer scared.

And whatever the future is, let us hope that it never becomes a place where it is fear that dominates and not the desire to determine and strengthen a common purpose to find a just path for positive collaboration underpinned by those values which may perhaps have lost some of their rhetorical potency but never their intent - to put the dignity of the human person at the heart of everything we do.

To conclude, and acknowledging of course current tensions between some Member States, some old, some new, I want to reflect on the beautiful, joyous words of the Irishman and Nobel prize winner, Seamus Heaney, in the poem he wrote to celebrate the arrival of new member states into the Union in 2004, including the Czech Republic.

The last recipient of this award, Timothy Garton Ash said that it took an Irish poet to remind us of the grandeur of the European project, but for me it is not only the grandeur of the project that Heaney speaks about, but also its core humanity and the recognition of the gift of tongues it gave us, a capacity to share understanding even through our different and beautiful languages.

*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*

I read these words when I took my oath of office in the Court of Justice in Luxembourg in 2013. They inspired me for what I wanted to do, to try to move lips, move minds and make new meanings flare. To the extent that I have been given this award for achieving even a small piece of that, I am humbled and grateful for that acknowledgement.

Thank you.