

## **‘Our mission is European independence.’**

*EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen uses her Charlemagne Prize award to call for a stronger and more effective Europe*

By Michael Stabenow

The Charlemagne Prize, awarded in Aachen on Ascension Day since 1950, is something like the Nobel Prize for services to European unification. It is therefore no surprise that this year's winner, Ursula von der Leyen, began her acceptance speech in the magnificent Coronation Hall of Aachen City Hall with the words: ‘Europe is my life. And it is the greatest honour of my life to stand here before you all today.’

### **Memories of her school days in Brussels**

For the 66-year-old CDU politician, who has been President of the European Commission since the end of 2019, the appearance in Aachen was almost like a home game. She was born in Brussels, where she spent the first 13 years of her life and attended the European School in the Uccle district. At that time, von der Leyen said, Europe was ‘something completely natural and wonderful’ for her. In her daily contact with classmates from the French, Dutch and Italian language departments, she experienced diversity, but also a shared sense of identity.

Even decades later, she still sees Europe through the same eyes, said von der Leyen, continuing: ‘I believe that it is precisely this connection between us, as different and diverse as we may be, that defines our Europe.’ And yet, the Commission President sees the serious upheavals of recent times, illustrated for example by ‘Putin's brutal, ruthless war against Ukraine,’ trade tensions, and the resurgence of extremist and illiberal tendencies on the Old Continent in Europe, as a mandate to respond with a stronger and more capable Europe. ‘The next era, our great unifying project, must be about an independent Europe,’ said von der Leyen.

In a way, it was a response to the Charlemagne Prize Board of Directors' justification for the award. The prize honours the Commission President for her services to the unity of the 27 member states, the containment of the coronavirus pandemic, political unity towards Russia, and her initiatives for a more sustainable economy (the ‘Green Deal’). However, the award ceremony also served ‘to encourage us to tackle the tasks ahead.’

### **Cathedral, synagogue and Charlemagne Prize: Three lessons from Aachen for Europe**

Von der Leyen clearly wanted to address this ‘encouragement’ in her acceptance speech, which was met with prolonged applause in the Coronation Hall. In the first part of her remarks, she referred to the role of Aachen and discussed the foundations

of the European community of values. On the morning of the award ceremony, she attended a mass in Aachen Cathedral. The building is 'a unique testimony to the intellectual, cultural and political renaissance initiated by the vision of Charlemagne'. After the Second World War, only 25 Jewish survivors returned to Aachen, the city where the Jewish girl Anne Frank once spent some time and where the Old Synagogue was destroyed in 1938.

Finally, the Commission President mentioned Aachen City Hall, where the Charlemagne Prize was first awarded in 1950 to Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, the founder of the Pan-European Union. Von der Leyen recalled his vision: a Europe in which people come together thanks to shared culture and values. Three references to Aachen and, for the Commission President, ultimately also the foundation on which the generation of founding fathers shaped European unification after the Second World War and which their heirs were able to develop further. From peace and reconciliation to economic unification with the single market, monetary union and finally the 'reunification of Europe' with the accession of ten Central and Eastern European states to the European Union.

### **A plea for an 'independent Europe'**

According to von der Leyen, it has since become clear that the harmonious years following the fall of the Berlin Wall were rather the exception in the development of Europe. Instability characterises the situation today, both outside and within the EU. 'We cannot allow ourselves to be thrown off course by the enormous changes we are experiencing. Nor can we fall back into the misconception that the storm will simply pass,' said the CDU politician. With a view to an 'independent Europe', she therefore named 'four central tasks'.

The Commission President began her list with a 'new form of Pax Europa for the 21st century' to be shaped by Europe. Recent developments in Ukraine in particular make it imperative to invest in Europe's security. Unlike in her remarks on trade policy, von der Leyen avoided any reference to the cooling of transatlantic relations within NATO. However, she said: 'History forgives neither hesitation nor procrastination. Our mission is European independence.'

### **'Europe can only thrive if democracy thrives.'**

Von der Leyen cited greater innovation and competitiveness in the European economy, the 'next European reunification' through the inclusion of neighbours seeking EU membership, and 'renewing and strengthening our democracy' as further priorities in the pursuit of an 'independent Europe.' It does not help to lament the electoral successes of extremist movements, nor is it enough to defend the status quo. 'It is up to us to provide the better arguments,' said the award winner, adding: 'Europe can only thrive if democracy thrives.'

## **Speeches by the Spanish king and the German chancellor**

The speeches at the award ceremony in Aachen City Hall were given by the Spanish head of state, King Felipe VI, and – eagerly awaited – German Chancellor Friedrich Merz. ‘She is the embodiment of the European spirit,’ said the Spanish king about the award winner. Merz told her: ‘You give Europe a voice in the world, a European voice.’ Unlike in the days of former Foreign Minister Henry Kissinger, who once lamented that no one knew who the contact person in Europe was, this question has now been resolved.

### **Merz: Commitment to and a promise for Europe**

The new German chancellor's commitment to Germany playing a leading role in the EU in close coordination with its partners, not least in shaping security policy, could be of lasting significance. Europe must be a project of peace not only internally, but also externally. ‘Freedom and democracy are worth standing up for resolutely and, if necessary, fighting for,’ said the CDU politician.

It is also important to represent the interests of the EU with its 450 million inhabitants confidently, as von der Leyen does, but at the same time to avoid a transatlantic escalation. Free trade and fewer restrictions serve the people on both sides of the Atlantic, explained the German Chancellor.

Merz concluded his speech with a promise: ‘In the coming years, I will devote all my energy to working towards a Europe that draws new strength from its cohesion. A Europe that continues to serve the people in the future – a Europe that, above all, defends our freedom.’

Translated with DeepL.com (free version)