

**Sperrfrist Redebeginn
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort**



**Verleihung des
Internationalen Karlspreises zu Aachen 2023**

an

**Wolodymyr Selenskyi, Präsident der Ukraine,
und an das ukrainische Volk**

**Rede
Präsidentin der Europäischen Kommission
Dr. Ursula von der Leyen**

englisch

Speech by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen 2023 for H.E. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, and the people of Ukraine

Aachen, 14 May 2023

“Check against delivery”

Dear President Volodymyr Zelenskyy,

Chancellor Olaf Scholz,

Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki,

Dear Lord Mayor Sibylle Keupen,

Dear Mr. Jürgen Linden,

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you come into Aachen and look around at the ancient landmarks and monuments, you can almost feel the weight of European history around you in all of its senses. Its violence and its beauty. Its pain and its progress. Its centuries’ old divisions and its decades’ young unity. This prize – as the founder Kurt Pfeiffer put it – embodies an obligation of the highest ethical value to make the next chapter of our common history better than the last. That obligation is for a strong Union of Europeans – quote – *“to defend the highest earthly goods – freedom, humanity and peace – and safeguard the future of their children and children’s children.”*

The person and the people that we are recognising today have lived up to that obligation better than any of us ever could. They are literally fighting for freedom, humanity and peace. They are bleeding and they are laying down their lives to safeguard the future of their children. And of ours. President Zelenskyy and the people of Ukraine know what they are fighting for. And they have understood what Europe and our Union is about.

My words cannot really do justice to this. But those of President Zelenskyy can. In his remarkable inauguration address in 2019 he told the people of Ukraine: *“We have chosen a path to Europe, but Europe is not somewhere out there. Europe is here [in the mind] and after it appears here, it will be everywhere, all over Ukraine.”*

President Zelenskyy, dear Volodymyr, I am resolutely convinced that those words will come true. And we will not stop working to make sure they do.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With pain comes strength and courage. Ukraine has shown this every day since that fateful morning when Russia sent columns of tanks and tens of thousands of soldiers across the border. When I met Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a shell-shocked Kyiv a few weeks later, I had just come from Bucha. I had just seen the mass graves next to the church, the body bags lined up tightly together. The early, cruel symbols of Putin’s war. I will never forget the image of those candles everywhere – each of which represented a mother or a father, a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister, a life senselessly extinguished. The feeling was of despair and anger.

But it was also of belief that Ukraine was fighting back and turning the tide. When I spoke to President Zelenskyy, I already knew about his courage and his will through the many calls and exchanges we had had in those bleak early days and weeks. But looking at him in the eyes, I was struck by the steadfast determination that he exuded. President Zelenskyy had the unshakeable belief that those fighting for something will always be stronger than those fighting to impose their rule.

That is how we will write the next chapter in our history. And it is for all this, for their courage and resilience, their sacrifice and their values, I cannot think of a more fitting winner of this Charlemagne prize than President Zelenskyy and the people of Ukraine. President Zelenskyy and the people of Ukraine are fighting for the values and the obligation that this prize embodies. And in doing so, they are also fighting for our own freedom and our values. Democracy and the rule of law, free speech and the freedom to create your own destiny.

That is what Ukraine is fighting for – and that is what President Putin is trying to extinguish. President Putin is destroying the work of peace that we have built together since the end of the second world war and later the fall of the Iron Curtain. President Putin aims to destroy the Europe, created by Charlemagne Prize winners such as Gyula Horn and Vaclav Havel, François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl and many others. President Putin tries to unravel the events of 1989 and the decades since, which saw the people of Europe tear down the Iron Curtain and "*Europe change its face forever*", as historian and Charlemagne prize winner Timothy Garton Ash put it so well.

Every generation has its moment when it has to stand up to defend democracy and what it believes in. For us, that moment has come. And just as the courageous freedom fighters changed the face of our continent a little more than 30 years ago, today it is we, who will decide what our Europe will look like in the future.

The Ukrainian people have revealed to the world the strength of their society. Their will to fight and to be free has amazed the world. Their iron-clad certainty where they belong is fascinating. The civil society has since a decade been the architect of Ukraine's move towards the European Union and proven their courage and determination time and again. Never can we match the sacrifice and the bravery of the Ukrainian people. But we can stand firmly by their side.

I am not just talking about the tens of billions of euros of support to Ukraine, the sweeping sanctions against Russia or the modern weapons and ammunition that we have pledged and delivered. I am also talking about accompanying Ukraine on its path towards our Union and getting ready for the future even as the war rages on. I am thinking of the countless Europeans who have opened their homes and their hearts for Ukrainian refugees – 4 million people who have found temporary shelter after leaving their homeland because of Putin's bombs. I would like to thank and to honour the many volunteers, the cities and municipalities, the teachers and sports clubs who integrate Ukrainian children into their groups, and the countless enterprises that give work to their parents.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is thanks to President Zelenskyy – thanks to the people of Ukraine – thanks to all of us sticking together – that Europe's face is changing once again. Ukraine incarnates everything the European idea is living for: the courage of convictions, the fight for values and freedom, the commitment to peace and unity. This is why I am convinced that Ukraine will prevail, it will win peace and make its European destiny come true.

The human rights defender Oleksandra Matviichuk said a few days ago in Vienna *"People in Ukraine want peace more than anyone else. But peace does not come when the country that was attacked lays down its weapons. That's not peace, that's occupation. And occupation is just war in another form."* I strongly agree with her. In the EU, we speak many different languages but in all of them victory translates as peace and justice, that is just peace.

Now, as it has always been the case with Europe – there will be "sceptics" that will say that it is impossible, a fantasy. But what if this is, in fact, our idea: to unite and make the impossible possible against all odds? Those words are again from President Zelenskyy. *"It's a victory,"* he said, *"When the guns fall silent and people are raising their voices."* He was talking about Ukraine. But he was describing Europe and what it stands for. What if this is our idea — to unite and make the impossible possible against all odds?

With today's prize, we are sending a clear message: We stand with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. We stand with the Ukrainian people. We stand by their side until together we achieve the impossible.

Slava Ukraini!

Long live Europe!