



## European Commission - Speech [Check Against Delivery]



### **Speech by President von der Leyen at the ceremony of honour for Jacques Delors**

Brussels, 31 January 2024

Dear Madam Aubry,

Dear members of the family of Jacques Delors,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

'Be brave, take heart, the springtime of Europe is still ahead of us!' These words closed the final speech given by Jacques Delors to the European Parliament, on 19 January 1995. A few days before the end of his 10 years as President of the European Commission. Words which reflect his optimism regarding the European project. And, even more, an optimism of will, the determination of a man who was always able to combine idealism with action. Much has been said over recent weeks about Jacques Delors, the Architect of Europe. The clear direction he set for future generations, who bestowed on him the title of Honorary Citizen of Europe, a title he shares with just two others: Jean Monnet and Helmut Kohl.

But too little has been said about his faith in Europe as a community of destiny. As we know, Jacques Delors was a believer. A man of faith. A man convinced that human beings fulfil their destiny by engaging with society, helping their neighbour. After all, he had seen with his own eyes the painful history of Europe and its tragic human consequences. That shaped his conviction that our eyes should be firmly fixed on the goal of ever-closer union between the nations and peoples that make up Europe, amid peace, freedom and solidarity. So a moral and historical mission as much as a pragmatic solution to the challenges we face. As he said himself in a speech to the European Parliament: 'Europe, despite the risk of succumbing to its divisions, remains wonderfully rich in its diversity. We must preserve this diversity, or even better, help it to flourish, for the common good'. For Jacques Delors, this community of destiny had to be based on the principle of subsidiarity. Respecting pluralism meant respecting diversity, as he would say. The European Union he built was not an alternative to the nation state. And we see this philosophy reflected in our Union's motto today: 'United in Diversity'.

This European ideal, as Jacques Delors liked to call it, was not just an intellectual exercise, or a simple profession of faith. It was the power behind incredible initiatives, the impact of which are still being felt today. Let us not forget. The early 80s was described by observers as a period of 'Eurosclerosis'. A time of economic crisis and political tensions. A European Community seen as absent, paralysed. As soon as he was appointed to the post, Jacques Delors understood the need to relaunch the project, to regain the confidence of European citizens, with a programme of fundamental change and a new dynamic. But also a change which governments could fully support. Following extensive consultations, Delors chose to work on something that already existed, the heart of the then European Community. This was the '1992 Deadline' – a vast project to create a single market uniting over 300 million people. A genuine area without borders. An area of freedom of movement. For goods, of course, but also for capital, for services, and no less importantly, for people. A lever to relaunch the European economy and make it more competitive. But also a call to Europeans to take ownership of the European area. In doing so, Delors succeeded in using the economy to relaunch Europe. In creating optimism in the middle of an economic crisis.

That said, I think the real revolution was elsewhere. It was institutional. It was the Single European Act, 'my favourite Treaty', as Delors liked to call it. The Single European Act not only confirmed the '1992 Deadline', but provided the institutional tools for it, in line with his beloved three-pronged approach: 'Competition that stimulates, cooperation that strengthens, and solidarity that unites'. It did this in several ways: by broadening the scope of decisions taken by qualified majority voting, a fundamental step forward; by extending European competencies in the fields of industrial policy, research, and even the environment; and last but not least, by placing social and regional cohesion at the heart of European priorities.

Let me focus on this aspect for a moment. Delors saw it as an essential condition for economic growth. Territorial cohesion to reduce the differences between Member States and between regions, of course. And social cohesion to combat inequalities. This was a subject close to Delors' heart, as a supporter of social dialogue, and his Val Duchesse initiative was instrumental in furthering it. Competitiveness and solidarity, together. This is a philosophy that we have inherited and which continues to shape our actions. Many advances sprang from the reforms of the Single European Act. Starting from the Maastricht Treaty that further solidified all these new policies.

Yes, Maastricht. The Treaty that created the 'European Union' and made enlargement possible. It was also the Treaty that launched economic and monetary union and the introduction of the euro. The euro – that major advance driven by Delors – was clearly both a symbol of this closer union and a tool for greater efficiency and economic sovereignty.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It would be remiss of me to celebrate only the architect of an integrated, competitive Europe that stands together. Jacques Delors was also heavily invested in Europe's place and role in the world. 'Renewal or decline' he said. He was convinced that Europe had to assert itself, to fully play its role in the world. And he understood that it could not do that without instruments of shared sovereignty. Such as the single currency, which he helped create, and a common defence. He called for it, but it did not see the light of day. He said 'Let us be powerful enough to command respect and to promote our values of freedom and solidarity. In a world such as ours, there can be no other way'. Freedom and solidarity promoted as humanist values in response to the upheavals of the world.

And with the fall of the Iron Curtain, this conviction would lean into the winds of history. As a German who has lived in a divided country, I am hugely grateful to Jacques Delors for his commitment to a reunified Germany and his conviction that Europe would ultimately be reunified. As early as autumn 1989, Jacques Delors was quick to show confidence in the power of European integration. In an interview to the German press on 12 November 1989, he said 'The European Community is the centre of gravity of European history. It is towards the Community that the inhabitants of the German Democratic Republic, of Poland and Hungary are looking. We must not disappoint them, we must offer them our assistance and our cooperation'. On his instigation, Europe set up the PHARE and TACIS programmes. The first instruments to help central and eastern European countries modernise and move closer to the European Union. We all know the famous 'Copenhagen criteria', adopted at the Copenhagen Summit in June 1993. These criteria guided the largest accession process Europe has seen so far. They are still the foundation of our work.

However, his view of Europe's role in the world went much further. It was the Delors Commission which committed to large international fora such as the G7, the G20 and the Rio Conference, predecessors to our COP meetings. It brought a smile to my face to read a newspaper article describing a meeting at the White House in 1993 between Jacques Delors and Bill Clinton. What did they speak about? The threat of US tariffs on European steel imports – some battles last forever.

Everyone agrees Jacques Delors was a master tactician. And a patient negotiator. Skills no doubt honed during his trade union years, and very useful in Europe. Essential qualities for bringing the Germans round to the idea of the euro. I quote: 'Not all Germans believe in God, but they all believe in the Bundesbank', he joked. That is something I can confirm. So we know what it took. Patience, rigour, work. Polishing and re-polishing so that each proposal is perfect, each argument convincing. Jacques Delors was a hard worker. We all know that. But always in his ambitions was a significant step forward for Europe and its people.

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is not just about a legacy, I believe the flame must be kept alive: the flame of youth and the Erasmus programme; of solidarity, structural funds and social dialogue; of will, ambition and pragmatism. After all, Europe's path is reinventing itself every day. Jacques Delors used to say that our European Union was a 'UPO', an 'Unidentified Political Object'. Ultimately, he taught us that what really matters is that we adapt to new needs. What matters is that we act with ambition and realism to take on new challenges. What matters is that we firmly hold onto the European ideal.

Long live Europe.

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