

Dear Mr. President

I want to thank our host, the Hungarian Presidency, for welcoming us here today.

We meet here in circumstances that are far from easy, both at home and abroad.

The values of democracy, freedom and respect for International Law, on which the European Union relies, are under threat.

And the environment in which we move is becoming more and more unpredictable and unstable in terms of security and defence.

An environment in which nation-States, however historically important they may have been, are, on a practical level, politically irrelevant.

I said this coming from a country that, 500 years ago, sent three ships to the unknown, discovered a new continent, later called America, and ruled the oceans for centuries.

That is why the most important message I want to convey today is this.

When it comes to foreign policy and international relations, the European Union is neither an enemy nor a competitor for our States.

On the contrary, the European Union is the necessary instrument to ensure that, in this new bloc politics, Europe is not once again trapped in the middle of a conflict led by others, be it from Washington, Moscow, Delhi or Beijing.

In other words, Member States have to assume that the world is not changing. **The world has already changed!** It is a giant chess game on which, sooner rather than later, we need to define what we want to be, player, the pawn or even worse, just the chessboard.

To do so, the EU needs to make use of existing and new opportunities.

At the international level, it is vital to intensify cooperation with those countries which, like us, share essential values and principles such as the rule of law, democracy and free markets.

Strengthening our relationship with NATO should be one of the Union's top priorities in the face of growing challenges and threats.

Since the beginning of this century, cooperation between the Union and NATO has made it possible to provide greater security for citizens both in Europe and beyond.

Together, the European Union and NATO represent more than a billion people and some of the world's largest economies, giving them significant political and military influence on a global scale.

However, European defence needs to be given more strength, autonomy and capacity to complement NATO: a strong European defence means a robust pillar for NATO.

This includes harmonised construction and acquisition processes, centralised procurement, and a higher level of integration of our civic-military structures.

We are in a period of giants' geopolitics. We are dealing with countries that are characterised by large populations, great economic power, and a unique military, diplomatic and economic capacity to react.

Meanwhile, in the European Union we are 27 different Member States, ranging from those with 83 million inhabitants to those with just under 600,000. Faced with this situation, we cannot afford to act separately. We need to cooperate with each other. The environment around us demands it.

Unfortunately, you don't have to go that far to find war. Here in Hungary, you only have to cross into the neighbouring country to be in it. Since the creation of the European Union, war seemed a thing of the past, almost distant.

But everything has changed since Russia's unjustified and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, a country that shares our values and yet from which more than six million Ukrainians, most of them refugees in Europe, have been forced to flee.

Now we have war on our borders.

And let me be clear, it is not only a direct attack on the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and respect for International Law that we share. It is also an attack on Ukraine's pro-European vocation and, with it, on the European Union as a whole.

We need a common European Defence Strategy to provide a collective and coordinated response to threats that have taken a global dimension beyond the traditional concept of the State. We need to strengthen Europe's defence industry through investments in both innovation and research in order to be able to compete on a level playing field with other powers.

And we need to move towards better coordination and integration of civic and military structures where possible and to the extent that it is possible

However, none of this can be done without a clear political will. That is why I am delighted that, for the first time in the history of the European Union, we will have a dedicated Commissioner for defence.

Dear colleagues, I would like to finish what I was saying a few minutes ago. If the world has changed, we have to change with it. That is why we need to invest more in defence.

But by “defence” I don’t just mean tanks, soldiers and weapons. Today, war can be invisible, and there are a host of new elements that threaten our security in hybrid ways.

It can be the instrumentalisation of migrants on Europe’s eastern borders, or the action of non-State actors such as the Wagner, pushing migrants along the Sahel route trying to collapse Europe’s southern borders.

It could be a computer attack on a nuclear power plant, it could be a power blackout, it could be the failure of the electoral counting system or outright vote buying.

It could be the leak of hundreds of personal data of staff of governments and EU institutions. It could be artificially altering the price of certain raw materials, or even blocking the passage of some of the world's major trade routes.

These are all real scenarios. Some have happened, some are happening and some are about to happen.

So as well as making sure that we have the necessary military capabilities, we need to make sure we are prepared for all kinds of eventualities.

Preparedness that enables us to have the capacity to put in place planned actions to respond effectively and in a coordinated manner to emergency situations.

And a preparedness that allows us to be able to adapt and recover in a reasonably short time, maintaining the functioning of critical infrastructures.

Preparedness, believe me, will be one of the most important words in the political debate in the coming years.

I commit myself today and here with you to use all the potential that this cooperation framework offers us to ensure that the voice of the national parliaments is properly channelled into the European Parliament and

that, together, we form a common position on the most relevant issues.

I would like to end my speech with a message. Great crises bring great opportunities. The European Union is not at its best, and it would be unwise to admit it. But this moment allows us to rethink our models and to be better prepared than before. We are facing an opportunity for change towards the future. And for this, I am convinced that all parties involved will rise to the occasion, to exchange ideas and to cooperate in the search for solutions.

The fact that we are gathered here is already a demonstration of our will to remain united, fighting for a common goal: a better future for our citizens and for Europe as a whole.