

Tuesday, 13/6/2023

**Speech by the President of the Republic, Mr Nikos Christodoulides at
the European Parliament – “This is Europe: Plenary debates with
Leaders”, in Strasbourg**

Honourable Madam, President of the European Parliament,

Distinguished Members of the European Parliament,

First of all, I would like to thank the President of the European Parliament for her kind invitation to be here today, more than three months after assuming the Presidency of the Republic of Cyprus, to speak before the European Parliament, before all of you, about how I envision the present and the future of our Union. The present and future of our European citizens and about my belief as to how we can face together common challenges and further develop the Union for a brighter future.

This emblematic Chamber of the European Parliament, here in Strasbourg, is very familiar to me. And perhaps it is this earlier close relation and synergy with the European Parliament, which creates in me today feelings of emotion and primarily a feeling of responsibility, now that my presence here is in the capacity of Head of State, and as member of the European Council.

I am greatly honoured to address you, the elected representatives of the European citizens, here at the very heart of European democracy. It is an honour that entails a sense of ‘debt’ because I know first hand your decisive role, in terms of the quality of life across our 27 countries, but also in the prospect of welfare, peace and security of the planet.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I firmly believe that the creation of the European Union is the most important collective achievement in our continent since the Enlightenment era. The political vision of the eminent men and women for uniting our continent through the creation of the EU institutions to establish peace and guarantee the prosperity and security of its peoples, is as relevant today as ever.

At the same time, I also believe that the work of these great men and women who set course has not been completed. But this work is on a constant evolutionary path and is now in our own hands.

The edifice that has been handed over to us must be treated as a legacy and an achievement that we must strengthen, and this requires vision, courage and determination. It is not our choice but our duty to work for a Union that becomes stronger every day, through the development of its institutions, with more common policies, with its Member States delegating an even greater part of their national sovereignty to common supranational institutions, with the aim of well-being, peace, security and perspective for every citizen, regardless of the country or region in which he or she lives.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I truly believe that the European Union is the greatest model of peace and prosperity after a horrible first half of the 20th century that has claimed the lives of millions of people on our continent. I am fully aware, as a current European leader, that we have a duty to develop this model of peace that we inherited from the great visionaries Schuman, Monet, Altiero Spinelli, Paul-Henri Spaak and Simone Vale. I am an advocate and a believer of a targeted, step-by-step process, aimed at building an EU with purely federal characteristics. This is dictated by our collective interest in today's difficult and ever-changing globalised international context, where challenges are common and therefore require a common and effective response.

As EU Member States, it is not enough to look forward to how to survive in today's international context with its intense geopolitical competitions. We need to create the preconditions to be protagonists. United in our diversity and utilizing our strong human potential, sharing our common principles and values, on which our European edifice is firmly founded. I am convinced that we can make the EU a protagonist and a pioneer, in the international developments.

Ladies and gentlemen,

After the tragedy of the great destructive wars of the first half of the 20th century, with the aim never to be repeated again, some dared and envisioned and laid the basis for a united Europe. They realised that power lies in our unity. They correctly understood that strength is in unity. We will build on this legacy, strengthening unity so that it is steadfast, because this will be our main tool, our strength, and our compass for the future we want for our citizens. We have utilised this unity, and I am proud of this, when we had to address recently successive crises.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Cyprus, at the southeastern edge of today's European Union, has since antiquity been an integral part of what historically began to be called Europe. The origins of our historical, economic, cultural and other ties with other peoples of Europe dates millions of years back and these bonds have been constantly developing and have become unbreakable.

The accession of Cyprus to the EU in the spring of 2004, a historic day that I still remember and that is still remembered by all Cypriots, was something that had long been expected. A natural development. It was a form of return to the area where we belong, through the formalisation of the already existing historical bonds of Cyprus with continental Europe.

I still believe that Cyprus' accession to the EU is the most important historical event since the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960 and marks the return to our home. To our common European home.

Today, after almost 20 years of progress, Cyprus is an active member of the EU. In this context, a very important milestone in the term of office of my administration is the effective exercise of the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU by Cyprus in the first half of 2026. I was blessed to be actively involved in the first Cyprus Presidency in 2012 and I have no doubt that the next Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU will be a very important milestone both for the Union and for my country.

I assure you today that my country will make the most of this opportunity to make a very positive contribution as the Presidency and as an honourable mediator to ensure institutional cohesion and to promote as many legislative files as possible that will broaden the added value of the European integration process and benefit all European citizens. Furthermore, we are already considering concrete, essential and necessary political initiatives that I would like to take undertake within the framework of our Presidency in relation to political cooperation as EU in the Mediterranean and the wider Middle East, our immediate neighbourhood, and which we will discuss with the institutions in due course.

Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

My recent election to the presidency of the Republic of Cyprus, without the support of the two major parties, but with the decisive support of civil society and smaller political forces and movements, took place on the basis of a program focused on the citizen. A modern programme based on the EU model of work and good practices from other Member States, a model based on what our active participation in the EU has taught us for so many years. My goal is the well-being of the citizens of Cyprus, peace and security. My success and election were considered unprecedented. For me, however, it was the affirmation of society's need for change, in order to truly hear the problems of society and to launch solutions, so that the citizens of Cyprus can be optimistic about their daily lives and envision their future as one with conditions of equality at work, education and health for all. For a smooth transition to a greener, digital, modern, equal society. I listened to society and immediately after my election, I began the implementation of such a program that constitutes, for me, my social contract with the Cypriot people.

With the next European elections for the election of the new Members of the European Parliament now visible on the horizon, I believe that we have a duty to listen again to the citizens attentively, to try to bring them closer to what happens in Europe, or rather to convince them that we are their voice, that we do not maintain distances, that we are one with them, and that the goal is common; it is the welfare and safety of all European citizens, and respect for the rights and equal opportunities for all.

We must regain the trust of our citizens in the great European ideal of peace, cooperation, solidarity and prosperity. To achieve this, we first need to do more to make European citizens aware of what the EU is doing to ensure their safety and improve their daily lives, and perhaps we need to communicate better what is happening and what will happen. Our citizens must realize the changes that are taking place with great effort. Whether this concerns the economy, work, the green transition, digital transformation, or migration.

We must be credible and politically responsible, and we must give value and continuity to the contributions made by the citizens themselves, in this very plenary chamber of the European Parliament. This should be our guide and vision for the next steps that we will all take together.

In the same context, I am firmly convinced that the EU must be strategically autonomous, in areas such as security, energy, health and elsewhere. This does not mean that the EU will be isolated or turn its back on its traditional, natural allies. Not at all. But today more than ever, we need an EU that is able to face the challenges effectively, to become a more valuable but also an equal partner and ally for its friends. Strategic autonomy is something that is dictated by our collective interest in today's difficult and ever-changing international context, as the reprehensible Russian invasion of Ukraine reminds us.

Regrettably, 17 months since the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war continues. It is therefore crucial that we equally continue our support to the heroic people of Ukraine.

Let me be clear: we will never allow border changes stemming from violence and war. We will never accept the result of Russia's aggression against an independent, sovereign state. It is a matter of principle and a priority to ensure that anarchy and the law of the jungle will not prevail over international law and the international rules-based order. The EU ought to be at the forefront of upholding international law and the UN Charter. This is, after all, an inherent part of its foundation and the EU Treaties.

For Cypriots in particular, who themselves have been victims of foreign invasion and an almost half-a-century-long occupation of part of their country by Turkey, there is no other choice. From day one of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Cyprus has maintained an unequivocal, principled stance in support of the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine. This is the path on which we will continue.

Cyprus will continue to support Ukraine, including through the European Peace Facility and the EU Monitoring Assistance Mission. We have been sending to Ukraine the biggest humanitarian aid packages ever assembled on the island. We are also hosting a large number of Ukrainian refugees in relation to our population, and we will continue to do so. Cyprus will be their safe haven for as long as necessary.

Within the EU, we exhibited unprecedented unity in response to this war. Our unity proved to be our most important tool. We have taken painful decisions, that have come at a cost for our peoples and societies. But it is a cost worth shouldering. In unity we need to continue, to jointly address issues that affect Ukraine but also have repercussions beyond EU borders. It has become blatantly and painfully clear that peace on the European continent cannot be taken for granted, that we must defend it, and that a threat to peace somewhere in Europe is a threat to each and every country in Europe.

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has also upended energy markets, triggering price volatility and energy insecurity across the world.

A crucial new element in the European policy response to this unprecedented situation is the REPowerEU Plan, building on the full implementation of the European Green Deal. As a result, both the EU, and its Member States, are dynamically reshaping their energy strategies to reflect new geopolitical realities and to address the need for affordable energy. This includes intensified actions to increase gas supplies from the EU's trusted partners.

Cyprus, the only Member State in the Eastern Mediterranean region with confirmed gas reserves, and with historically excellent relations and long-standing partnerships in the field of energy with the vast majority of its neighbours, can play a key role in our joint efforts to address the energy crisis, by providing a reliable, alternative energy corridor to Europe, comprising diverse sources and routes.

We are of the view that the presence of major oil and gas companies in the region, could be leveraged to create synergies towards a sustainable regional gas market that could supply the EU with gas in the immediate future and with hydrogen in a few years' time. Gas has a vital role to play in the Energy Transition, as the most environmentally friendly conventional fuel and a potential raw material to produce hydrogen.

For this reason, we are intensifying our discussions with all major oil and gas companies, to implement our vision to connect these different gas fields in the region, via pipelines, to a modular liquefaction plant situated in Cyprus, through which gas can be exported to Europe.

In addition, the East Med region has recently become much more proactive in pursuing and enhancing its energy goals towards a green transition. Both Israel and Egypt are progressing with important renewable energy projects, to export renewable energy as well as to use it internally. As such, in 5-10 years' time, the regional electricity interconnections currently in the pipeline, namely EuroAsia Interconnector between Cyprus, Greece and Israel, and the electricity interconnector between Cyprus, Greece and Egypt, could contribute significantly to the supply of renewable energy from the East Med region to the European market.

Maintaining a stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean is to the benefit of the region and its people, but also of strategic importance for the EU. It is therefore of critical importance for the EU to continue sending clear and firm messages of deterrence to potential spoilers in the region, urging them not to proceed to new provocations and to engage constructively in the efforts aiming at reaching solutions in a peaceful and sustainable way, based on international law.

Further to the energy equation of the Eastern Mediterranean, one must acknowledge that the common and pressing challenges the region faces can be addressed effectively only by acting collectively. Cyprus, as a pillar of stability and security in a volatile region, actively promotes its regional cooperation policy through the trilateral mechanisms of cooperation it established with Greece and countries of the region, in an effort to create regional synergies and partnerships, which in turn will have a positive impact on the wider region.

The trilateral collaborations of Cyprus and Greece with the countries of the region have yielded tangible results, through the consolidation of regional partnerships that contribute to strengthening our relations at the political level, as well as expanding and deepening them in several sectors, such as energy, defense and security, environmental protection, natural disasters and cultural heritage.

It goes without saying that no country excluded from such networks of regional cooperation, provided they abide by across-the-board fundamental rules of international law.

Further strengthening of our relations with the countries of the Mediterranean, the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf will remain a key pillar of our foreign policy. This empowers Cyprus to have an active role as a geopolitical gateway between the EU and the MENA region.

We believe that Cyprus' regional policy adds value to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Our political ties with the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood allow us to bring strategic knowledge in the relevant EU

discussions, while at the same time we are able to convey key messages of their specific concerns to our EU partners, and vice versa.

Cyprus' pivotal geographic position and its proximity to the continents of Asia and Africa is another determining factor, most recently evident when the island was utilized as a safe transit hub in the evacuation efforts from Sudan. This was not the first time Cyprus has assisted in such operations, with the most extended one being during the Lebanon crisis of 2006, when tens of thousands were evacuated and provided with humanitarian assistance, proving the lasting contribution of Cyprus as a reliable stakeholder and as a safe harbour in the region. We shall continue to contribute our utmost whenever needed.

Notwithstanding the challenges the region is faced with, we are also witnessing that the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean are on a positive, transformative trajectory. The changing political dynamics in our neighbourhood, such as the recent rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Syria's return to the League of Arab states, the Abraham Accords and the maritime border deal between Israel and Lebanon all constitute indicative examples of this rapidly evolving geopolitical mosaic.

The wider Middle East and Gulf is not just Cyprus's neighbourhood. It is the EU's neighbourhood, and a vital one at that. We ought to acknowledge with courage and honesty that as the EU we have not invested as much as we ought to in this crucial region. We ought to boldly work on making it a strategic priority to engage on a positive agenda with our partners in the region, whom we must see as equal partners, to assert a more active, extrovert role, so as to effectively reinforce the EU's ties with its Southern Neighbours, and in doing so promoting peace and stability in the region.

Turning to migration, we must take into consideration the overall migratory pressure that Europe is facing, with certain Member States, including Cyprus, being at the forefront.

In fact, Cyprus is the Member State with the highest percentage of first-time asylum applications in relation to its population. The military occupation of 37%

of its territory by Turkey constitutes an aggravating factor that hinders efforts towards sound management of flows, since control of those entering the country from the northern aerial and sea frontiers is practically impossible. Consequently, Cyprus is particularly vulnerable to the instrumentalization practices used by Turkey, and this is clear from statistical data showing that 90% of the migrants applying for asylum have departed from, arrive at the illegal airport in the occupied areas or at the northern coasts, then cross the buffer zone, and apply for asylum at the areas under the control of the Republic of Cyprus.

The Government is committed to taking all necessary action to improve infrastructure for the reception of asylum seekers and expedite examination procedures, but also to increase the rate of returns of those who do not have any legal right to remain in Cyprus, making use of the support provided by the EU and its Agencies, which we greatly appreciate. Furthermore, the Government is in close contact with the Commission, which is preparing a dedicated Action Plan for the Eastern Mediterranean migratory route.

Domestically, we are also introducing a Bill for the establishment of a Deputy Ministry for Immigration, Asylum and Integration, so as to better coordinate and implement our policies, which also include policies for effectively integrating legally residing third-country nationals.

However, it will be difficult to achieve tangible and sustainable results in the absence of addressing the root causes of the phenomenon, or in the absence of a coordinated response at EU level, one that will convince Turkey to honour the obligations already assumed towards all Member States.

Last week, the Council reached a general approach on two crucial aspects of the new Pact for Migration and Asylum. The difficulty of the negotiations demonstrates how thorny the issue is for all Member States, and how many concessions had to be made in order to reach this agreement. Having said that, I hope that trilogues with the European Parliament will proceed quickly. We need this Pact for the EU to be able to respond adequately in future crises, always in line with the *acquis* and international law.

For the Pact to work, it is imperative to maintain balance between solidarity and the principle of responsibility, and to keep working hard on the external aspects of migration, so as to reduce irregular flows. In this respect, on our part we continue working closely with the Commission for the Eastern Mediterranean Action Plan, and we warmly welcome the Team Europe approach in the outreach to key third countries.

An integral part of promotion of peace in the region of the Eastern Mediterranean is our unwavering efforts to reunify Cyprus through a comprehensive settlement in line with international law, UN Security Council Resolutions and the EU law, values and principles. Peace in Cyprus, with the EU at the forefront of the efforts to reunify one of its own member states, would send a resounding message of peace in a region that desperately needs it.

The European Parliament has always supported Cyprus and its struggle to solve the Cyprus problem, a problem of invasion and occupation that constitutes an open wound to the body of the whole of Europe. Thank you on behalf of the Government and the people of Cyprus for all the efforts, for the very important resolutions for us, including, of course, the resolutions on Famagusta, and for the approval and at times the increase of the EU's donation related to the investigations for the missing persons.

I also thank the President of the European Parliament for her sincere and personal interest, as well as the relevant action by the political groups in support of the efforts to terminate the occupation and to reunify our country.

The reunification of Cyprus through a comprehensive, viable solution to the Cyprus problem, in the framework of the agreed basis by the UN, is the highest priority of my Government. Forty-nine years of occupation and division in the heart of Europe are far too many. I assure you that I will spare no effort in order to achieve the resumption of the talks, always within the framework agreed by the UN as the basis for a solution, and from the point where they stopped at Crans Montana in 2017.

For this purpose, I have held a number of meetings with, among others, the UN Secretary-General and other UN officials, with the Presidents of the EU

Institutions, with my counterparts, Heads of state and Government of EU member states, and with the Turkish Cypriot leader.

At all my meetings I convey the need for a new approach. My proposal substantially provides for an enhanced EU involvement and role in the efforts both for breaking the current deadlock and in the framework of the resumption of the talks.

In order to avoid any misinterpretation, I stress that we do not want any change with regard to the framework of the solution, which is always the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, and which also constitutes our safety valve against the Turkish position on 'two states.' Nor do we want the EU to replace the UN. On the contrary, we want the EU to act in a complementary and supplementary manner to the UN. It should be utilized as a reunifying tool, as is of course the nature of the Union; namely to unify and create conditions of peace and of respect for the human rights of all. This is what both the Treaties and the European acquis stand for.

The Republic of Cyprus is a member state of the EU and the Cyprus problem is a European problem that requires European solutions. The EU has every interest but also an obligation to actively contribute, through a leading role, to its final settlement, utilizing all political and economic means and tools at its disposal, within the framework of EU-Turkish relations. I am ready to discuss a gradual and beneficial package for everybody, within the framework of the EU-Turkish relations, which will evolve in parallel with the negotiations on the agreed basis.

My proposal also includes the appointment of a high-ranking European political figure as the EU envoy on the Cyprus problem. I believe that such a figure would contribute the utmost, especially at the present juncture, in breaking the deadlock and relaunching the talks.

It is understood that if we succeed in returning to the talks, the EU must also contribute at a technocratic level as it had done during the previous round of negotiations. The presence of the EU had contributed to a great extent in the achievement of multiple convergences and was pivotal in bringing us close to a solution to the Cyprus problem in 2017. At the moment, the EU's presence is deemed necessary at the stage of the efforts to break the deadlock. The Cyprus

issue can become a new successful model of peace for the EU, through which the Union can prove in practice that it possesses the unifying power and tools to become a founder of peace and security. This is what we look forward to and we will fight for it with all our strength. In this, we need all of you, as allies, here in the European Parliament, strong allies in this approach.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to conclude my intervention, today, by underlining that the participation of the Republic of Cyprus as an equal member state of the EU is of the highest importance.

In the past, I have stressed many times – I have done so today as well – that Cyprus' accession to the EU is the greatest historic achievement since the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus. Nineteen years after our accession, I believe that despite the difficulties and problems that the EU faces at times, the participation of Cyprus in the large European family constitutes a strong political and diplomatic shield to counter any threats against our national sovereignty and independence. The continuing division of Cyprus, as a result of Turkey's invasion and occupation, is, unfortunately, the greatest political anachronism within, what is in all other respects, the most contemporary union of sovereign states on our planet.

Jean Monet had as one of his guiding principles the solution of problems through the addition of yet another dimension to an issue, thus differentiating the initial context of the problem. "You change the context, you change the problem," he used to emphasize. I firmly believe that through the more active institutional engagement of the EU and the diversification of the framework of the problem, by intensely engaging the EU-Turkish dimension, we can break the current impasse and resume the negotiations from the point they were interrupted in July 2017, by focusing on the objective for the comprehensive solution of the Cyprus problem.

We demand nothing less and nothing more than what the citizens of the rest of the EU member states enjoy. The Cypriot refugee, the Cypriot citizen, is entitled to enjoy in his country the same rights and basic freedoms as any European

citizen in the rest of Europe does. This is what we expect – as it is self-evident – and we are convinced that the EU can become a catalyst for peace.

I decided to run for President of the Republic of Cyprus as an independent candidate, without the support of any party. I was elected against the odds, the first time a president in Cyprus was elected without the support of one of the two big political parties. I know how to make courageous, bold moves, against the odds. And I believe, with engagement from all parties, and from the EU, I can be the President to solve the Cyprus Problem.

So, I conclude by saying that for me and for my Government, a strong EU means a strong Cyprus. Strong Cyprus equals a stronger Europe. My political commitment is that I will work tirelessly both within the framework of my participation in the European Council and on a broader scale so that the EU remains coherent and united in this difficult period of time with the geopolitical instability and the war that has, unfortunately, returned to our continent. It is my firm conviction that by staying true to the founding principles and values of our Union, we can look forward to better days. We can look forward to an even better and stronger EU for the benefit of our citizens and above all the new generation in our countries, who constantly look towards us in search of hope.

Thank you.

(RM/EK/MPO)