

**Speech by Ingrida Šimonytė, Prime Minister of Lithuania**  
**The Europa-Forum Wachau**  
**June 12, 2021, Austria**

Dear Federal Chancellor, Commissioner,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased and honored to be here with you today at Göttweig Abbey, a Baroque masterpiece: truly unique yet so familiar to someone like me, who was born and raised surrounded by the Baroque churches of the old Vilnius.

While arriving here, I was immersed in the stunning beauty of hills, forests, and vineyards. I caught glimpses of the mighty Danube flowing calmly through centuries, countries, history, and cultural heritage – from "An der schönen, blauen Donau" by Johann Strauss to Lithuanian folk songs (surprising, but it's true).

And as we got to the top of this hill and I looked around, I thought there could be no better place to discuss Europe, heading to new horizons!

Horizons that are vast. That might seem somewhat different, depending on where each of us stands, and what perspective we look from.

Horizons that might seem distant, at first. But then each of us brings their snapshot to the table and we realise they all cling together like perfectly fitting pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Because they might differ, but they all have connection points. They are all parts of something bigger. And when assembled, they become one whole. They become stronger. And that horizon that might have seemed remote, it isn't anymore. It becomes clear, simple, and easier to reach – because it's common to all of us.

For me, that's what Europe is. That jigsaw puzzle. Bizarre, while scattered – yet strong and making sense when consolidated around what unites us.

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When Europa-Forum Wachau was established in 1995, Lithuania was just back on the map of Europe – having broken free from the strangling grip of the Soviet empire, restoring our statehood, and rebuilding our democracy from scratch.

In 1995, we had just voiced our EU aspirations and were making every effort to achieve membership – something many in the EU considered to be on a very distant horizon, perhaps, even unreachable. Back then, we might have not had completely grasped how complicated the EU was with all its common policies, committees, working groups, and endless negotiations seeking compromise.

In our eyes, the EU was primarily a community of values and freedom, the antipode to the Soviet regime built on repressions, mind-policing, and submissive obedience.

Securing our freedom and ability to build our own future by becoming a fully-fledged member of the EU and the Euro-Atlantic community, was the major driver that helped us reform and achieve success faster than the wildest predictions (except for our own) might have been.

Today, with 17 years of EU membership, our understanding of how the EU works is much deeper. We know that different member states do have different interests, that MFF negotiations can last into early morning, and some decisions require dozens of meetings. We've learned the mechanisms of the EU clock. It's not Swiss and, boy, have we learned about its flaws.

But after all those years on the outside and within, when my country looks at the EU, through all the mechanisms, complicated (and sometimes maddening) as they are, regardless of all the differences among the fellow member states, we still see the EU as a community bound together by values.

I hope I will never live to see this attitude change in Lithuania.

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One could say, if we travel alone, we might be faster. But if we want to get far, to reach the horizon, we must stick to each other.

And on that journey, it's not some short-sighted economic interests that will keep us together – no, they will rather split our paths.

To move forward, we must ask ourselves – what is that I hold dear or fear of, maybe we have this in common, you and I. We'll have conversations along the way, telling each other stories about ourselves, sharing our problems and experiences – some of them truly painful.

But if we really listen to the other, we'll sure hear something that resonates with our own story – like the frescos on the walls of this monastery resonate with my childhood memories.

We all have things in common. Be it the history of oppression, a bullying and terrorising neighbour – or an oppressed neighbour and friend we care deeply about and want to help. The Ottoman Empire in the past or the Kremlin empire in the very present. Western Balkans or Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

We share a need to protect ourselves – from hackers in whatever cellar they are hiding and on whoever's order they are breaking into the networks of your country or mine. From a cog in the propaganda machine or a troll factory – regardless of which pocket they are paid from to meddle in our lives.

We ask for each other's help when facing an influx of organized smuggling of people – should it come through Italy, Spain or Greece, via Austria or Finland, or from Belarus, with the knowledge and assistance of the Lukashenka regime, as Lithuania experiences now.

So as we are here today to discuss our vision for the future of Europe, here is mine. A Strong Europe, united *for doing good by each other, for each other, and for the other.*

United around our common values such as democracy, peace, freedom, and human rights, and committed to defending and promoting them peacefully within and outside our borders.

The EU has been doing this successfully for the past 70 years. But we must do better: inside the EU and beyond.

Not forgetting that Europe does not end at the EU borders, so our closest neighbours in Europe must never doubt our commitment to them. Even though it is not easy to stay faithful to values in foreign policy and the temptation of *Realpolitik* is always there.

An EU which walks back from its own commitments, cannot expect to be taken seriously neither on the global stage, nor by our own citizens.

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Jean Monnet, one of the founders of the EU, was right – Europe is born in crises. And if the ones from history books often fail to teach us a proper lesson, we should perhaps start drawing lessons from our most recent experiences of which we have had a fair share.

Economic and financial crises, migration flows, populism, hybrid attacks, and military aggression at our borders – southern and Eastern. Not a single European country has enough tools to address these challenges alone.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we need more Europe, not less, in dealing with global crises.

Despite a slow and chaotic start, we have managed to rediscover the essential truth – that we are stronger, when we are united. Coordinated EU actions have been key to ensuring an effective and bold response to the pandemic. From repatriation of EU citizens stranded in the third countries to EU investment in the development of COVID-19 vaccines.

EU economic response has also been unprecedented as we have managed to agree on the recovery plan “Next Generation EU”. The European cooperation did save lives during the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to do so in the EU and beyond.

From the very beginning of the crisis, the EU has demonstrated global solidarity – first, by providing medical supplies, now finally rolling out the vaccine sharing that Lithuania has joined by pledging 200 000 doses to our Eastern partners as a first step.

Too often national governments have searched for the scapegoat in Brussels. I really believe that a series of recent crises – financial, refugee, and the pandemic – have taught us how fragile and precious the EU is.

One of the biggest mistakes would be to take the greatest EU achievements for granted – or to forget that the next time we’ll face something like this pandemic, it will be the EU we will turn to first, again.

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As we gradually exit the ‘fire-fighting’ mode, we should return to our long-standing issues. They are numerous, and they have not magically resolved themselves during the pandemic.

I have in mind climate and digital transition, social challenges, interconnections inside the EU (cohesion, single market, transport, and energy networks), resilience – and the list goes on.

But while dealing with them, we cannot ignore that some crises are still full speed on and worsening, just at our borders.

We cannot look away from brutal violations of fundamental human rights in Russia and Belarus where governments continue to oppress their own societies. Growing authoritarianism in our immediate neighbourhood is our problem too.

The signal to both regimes should be clear: ‘back to normal’ is impossible. The only way forward in Belarus is end of torture, the release of all political prisoners, dialogue with civil society, and new democratic presidential elections asap in 2021.

EU's credibility is and will be tested every day in Eastern neighbourhood, and we must be firm in our response.

In Russia, it is crucial to firmly support Russian civil society and, I believe, EU having a more ambitious and forward-looking Eastern Partnership policy helps Russia, too.

EU should not be ignorant towards Russia's external aggression and its meddling into sovereign affairs of our Eastern neighbours, through frozen conflicts, disinformation and hybrid tools, and vaccine diplomacy.

RU uses conflicts for its geopolitical gains and undermines the stability of the Eastern Partnership countries and their cooperation with the EU. Thus, we must maintain the unity of the West, as it is the best response to Russian aggressive actions.

The policy of sanctions and strategic patience can and will affect RU's behaviour – but only if we remain firm and united.

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Dictators holding on to power at the price of human lives and freedom have seemed far away from some European capitals.

Well, Vilnius was just a direct three-hour flight away from Athens.

But the regime in Belarus decided to forcefully land the Ryanair plane and take over a hundred EU citizens as hostages in Minsk just to extract Raman Pratasevich, a young journalist. Lukashenka considers an enemy of the state. While Lukashenka himself has long become an enemy to his own people.

I am deeply, truly grateful for the immediate support of Austria and so many European and World countries as Lithuania was living through this act of state-sponsored terrorism.

The EU was as swift and strong as ever in its response, and I believe our skies will be a little safer after the painful lesson we were taught.

But as we manage to stand by each other when EU countries experience terror, we cannot forget that the people of Belarus have been experiencing this terror for over a quarter of a century now – and ever stronger since the 'election' farce broke the legendary Belarusian patience last August.

The streets of Minsk and other Belarusian towns have been forcefully emptied of crowds since then. But the suffering of the Belarusian people continues.

We can see it when we look at the hardly disguised bruises on Raman Pratasevich's face and hands, and in the eyes of Sofia Sapega as they give coerced 'confessions' of crimes they've never committed.

We can see it in the eyes of the wife of Vitold Ashurok burying her husband who died in prison of an alleged cardiac arrest.

We can see it in the photos of numerous, nameless women waiting for their loved ones by the prison doors as they must be released – but aren't, time and again.

Lives are at stake for tens, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians. As for us, the EU, Europe – our own destiny and our own character will be defined by the way we react.

By whether we actually act in accordance with our values or keep enjoying these values within our privileged club watching as they are treaded down just at our backyard.

Will we be able to remember that while foreign news columnists of our media outlets might be temporarily preoccupied with headlines on Belarus, Alexei Navalny and other Kremlin critics are still in jail in Russia?

Will we one day dare ask ourselves: if the regimes spend so much money and effort to undermine Western values and our way of life, maybe it's time to freeze their accounts in our banks and send their kids, wives, and numerous lovers home, out of our best universities, luxurious resorts, and other spoiling pleasures of the European lifestyle?

Is it enough to just have values, or are we ready to stand up and defend them wherever they are threatened?

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Today, many nations still look at Europe as a source of inspiration, and a friend that will always be at one's side when the ideals of freedom, democracy, and human rights are at stake.

That is the image of Europe I hold dear in my heart from the times when Lithuania was still fighting for its freedom. This kind of Europe was key in motivating us to move forward.

Indeed, it's impossible to overestimate the importance of having a reliable friend.

At the end of the day, what counts, it is these friendships, care for each other, and care for the ideals that, let us not forget, are the core reason of the well-being that European Union enjoys.

Thank you.