



## Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the Annual General Meeting of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV)

Athens, 21 June 2016

Mister President, Αγαπητέ Πρόεδρε, Αγαπητέ φίλε  
Prime Minister, Αγαπητέ Αλέξη  
Chairman, Αγαπητέ Θεόδωρε  
Commissioner,  
Dear friends,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very honoured to be with you this evening. One has always to say that when one is addressing an audience, but this time it is really true. I am happy to be here, because I know that this is an important event in the Greek calendar.

And I would like to thank the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises for giving me the opportunity to address so many representatives and actors of the real economy here in Greece.

It is a great pleasure to be here again in Athens tonight because during my long political life, some of the most important events have taken place here in this country and in its capital city.

It is now 35 years since Greece joined the European Economic Community as the European Union was called at that time. And I remember celebrating the news.

We – you – have achieved a lot. The country has modernised, it has opened itself to the world and it has taken its rightful place at the heart of the European family. Today, even in times of difficulty, Greece is a free and vibrant society, and it is a vital member of the European Union. The achievements of Europe should never be taken for granted.

This European Union has faced its worst economic, financial and social crisis since World War II. And it is still struggling with the consequences.

I have often used the Greek word 'polycrisis' to describe the current situation.

Our various challenges – from the security threats in our neighbourhood and at home, to the refugee crisis, and to the UK referendum – have not only arrived at the same time. They also feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of our people.

For too many years now, Greece and its people have been at the eye of the storm, and today I want to salute the patience and the determination you have shown.

Your actions – and your sacrifices – underline your commitment to the task facing your country. They are also a testimony of your place within the European Union.

Tonight, I want to bring a message of determination and a message of hope, for Europe and for Greece, but it is a demanding message at the same time.

I bring this message as a friend of Greece. As you know, friends are allowed to share some uncomfortable truths.

For me, the challenge which this great nation and people are facing is not only economic and social: it is about building a modern State – a State which is able to deliver on the promises of this great democracy; a State which cares and which works for its people; a State which makes Greece a proud member of the European Union.

My personal commitment to Greece and to its place in the euro area – where it belongs, securely anchored – is nothing new. I have always put my trust in the Greek people, and it remains there today.

Even before I took office as the President of the European Commission, I worked with a number of Greek governments to keep the country firmly in the euro area. It was under my Presidency of the Eurogroup, in 2012, that we agreed to a significant restructuring of private debt, and envisaged the possibility of debt relief in the future.

Even before taking office, I made it clear that mistakes – on all sides – had been made, and I wanted to change the way things are done.

I wanted to replace the 'Troika' with a more democratic and a more accountable structure. I argued that the European and national parliaments should play a bigger role. And I wanted a stronger social dimension for the European Union, and for any future programme.

Keeping Greece in the euro area was a political and a democratic process, and it was a hard fight –

Alexis you remember it.

We had summits of the Finance Ministers. Endless day and night meetings of the Heads of State and Government. Parliaments of the euro area mobilised. Pressure in the markets, pressure in the media. I did not like what I heard. I did not like what I saw – on both sides. Finger-pointing, insults, scapegoats, lies. We saw the ghosts of the past. We saw Europe at its worst.

I fought for the dignity of the Greek people. I fought for the respect of all the other democracies of the euro area. And I fought for the general interest and the values of the European project.

And I fought for a simple idea: in the European Union, responsibility and solidarity go together.

For me, Greece's exit from the euro area never was and never will be an option. We had to say it, and we had to fight for it, against all the "bien-pensants" and "naysayers" suggesting that a Greek exit from the euro would be good for everyone. The same who are now suggesting – but this time they are right – that it is best for another great nation to stay within the European Union.

Today, let me say this: it is vital that our view prevailed. I am not a man who hides or exaggerates problems, but an exit would have been catastrophic for everyone, starting with the noble people of this country.

The agreement we found last summer was agreed by all 19 euro area Member States, including Greece.

I am happy that Greece is now anchored securely within the euro and that Greece now has a chance to rebuild its future.

All of this is happening at a time when things are changing and taking a new shape across Europe.

Too often we focus on crises, and we forget the bigger picture. And the bigger picture tells us that a lot has happened in Europe over the last 20 months.

In our first weeks in office, we launched an EUR 315 billion euros Investment Plan for Europe, a Plan that has already mobilised more than 100 billion euros across 26 Member States – including Greece.

We are pushing for new sources of growth with new strategies for the Digital Single Market, Capital Markets Union and Energy Union, and a commitment to Better Regulation which is unprecedented.

We set out a new roadmap for the future of the euro.

We reformed our European economic governance, so that we can better support our Member States as they modernise their economies, and giving them new flexibility to carry out reforms and investment.

The Stability and Growth Pact has not been transformed into a Pact of Flexibility, but we need flexibility.

And we are pushing for a strong social agenda, focusing on skills, rolling out a Youth Guarantee and promoting health and safety at work.

And if you look at the facts: there is recovery in Europe. There is job creation. We have created 5 million jobs since 2013. The employment rate in the European Union is higher than it was in the year 2000.

So in spite of global uncertainty, Europe is very much on the mend. So this is not the world of blind, stupid austerity which many people continue to fantasise about. That idea is something I never supported, and I never will.

Together with this new momentum in Europe, the efforts that Greece has made since last summer – and the encouraging first signs – we are creating a window of opportunity.

And with the new agreement on the first review and on debt measures, Greece now has the chance to turn the corner.

This programme is much more than a programme of fiscal consolidation.

This is about modernising the Greek economy and the Greek State, so that we can put in place the right conditions for economic growth and the right conditions for business.

This is about guaranteeing pensions for your children and for your grandchildren.

This is about combating tax evasion, because we have to finance in a fair way public goods.

This is about dealing with corruption and cronyism. This is about speeding up justice.

This is about establishing a modern welfare system which can protect and redistribute according to people's needs, and which ensures that there is a minimum income for the most vulnerable.

And modernising the State also means a Greece that carries out its European duties when it comes to managing EU borders and receiving refugees.

Today, I want to recognise this country's response to the refugee crisis, and pay tribute to the women and men, who have opened their hearts, opened their doors, helped to save lives and helped to restore dignity.

But this generosity needs solid institutional backing. We expect a lot from Greece, just as we expect a lot from the other Member States to stand behind European commitments to manage the refugee crisis. Here again, solidarity and responsibility go together.

The priority for the coming years – the programme which Greece and its partners have agreed together – is about building a modern and resilient Greece. I should probably be less blunt, but this is

perhaps the last chance to do what is good and what is necessary for Greece.

In my political life, I have often recalled the words of that great advocate of human rights, James Freeman Clarke, who said: "A politician thinks of the next election. A statesman, of the next generation."

What we need now is clear: broad political support, full ownership and efficient implementation on all sides. Implementation is of importance.

Let us be clear: it is the Greek government which ultimately decides the policy mix to achieve the programme targets. It is the Greek authorities, at all levels, who ensure that reforms bring real change on the ground.

You are not doing this for "Brussels", or for the creditors. You are doing this for yourselves, for your people and for your future, which is a European future.

This should be clear in everyone's mind. Those who say the contrary are the enemies of trust and are the enemies of progress. They are the enemies of the confidence and stability which is so much needed for this country to recover.

And let us not fall for conspiracy theories either. I can assure you: there is no conspiracy against Greece. On the contrary, I see a lot of straight talking, an abundance of good will, and genuine hope that Greece succeeds.

This is why I want to see all Greek governments – now and in the future [*Alexis, your government is not the last one, there will be other governments after yours; but I wanted to say here that we have the best relations possible. We were starting in a dark corner, and now we are moving in the light of the sun*] – I would want to see all Greek governments respecting this agreement, with sincerity and with determination and with ambition for the Greek people.

I know that the Greek people have already suffered a lot.

It has not been easy, and I do understand why many still have doubts about where this road is leading and whether it is worth the price.

But let me say this. Today, confidence, stability and also growth are returning. We can see the first results of the latest efforts, and they are cause for hope.

Greece now has an opportunity to turn the corner, and return to sustainable and fair growth that will produce new jobs.

Thanks to the Commission, I have to say it, Greece has already been given exceptional conditions to benefit to the fullest from EU funding.

Between 2014 and 2020, the European Union will invest more than 35 billion euros in Greece: 20 billion from the European Structural and Investment Funds and 15 billion from the EU's Agricultural Guarantee Fund. This money is money for the real economy. I would like the Greek authorities to use this money, because the money is there.

We secured a reduction in the national co-financing rate and a green light to frontload financing.

Together with the clearance of State arrears foreseen under the new disbursement, these can be a very powerful stimulus to the economy.

These better conditions are already paying off, and thanks to them, Greece is now the best performer in the European Union when it comes to absorbing structural funds, 95% of the funds are absorbed.

EU funding is vital money for the real economy:

it supports entrepreneurship, innovation, small businesses, education and training, energy and transport, the transition to a low-carbon economy and the efficiency of public authorities.

And these are very concrete priorities and projects:

- Take for example the regeneration of the seafront in Thessaloniki, which will strengthen the local economy, make the city greener and more welcoming to tourists;
- Take the construction and extension of the Athens Metro system, which helps reducing traffic congestion, smog levels and journey times.
- Take the refugee crisis, where within the past year, the European Union funded more than 850 additional staff and equipment to help the Greek authorities manage the flows, providing food, shelter and basic needs for more than 50 000 migrants arriving to Greece.

In addition to existing European funds we expect the Investment Plan for Europe, which is also known as the "Juncker Plan" – not because I called it like that but those who thought that this would be a total failure, wanted to pre-identify the one who would be responsible for the failure; since it works, it is no longer called "Juncker Plan", it is now called the Investment Plan for Europe – this Investment Plan for Europe, we want it to play an increasing role in Greece as a complement to other sources of financing.

Since this Plan exists, let me be clear: we are moving away from a culture of subsidies to one that facilitates private investment, through risk-taking and risk-sharing. The success of the Plan will depend on improving the framework conditions for investment, which is why we insist on the pursuit of reforms

everywhere.

The Investment Plan for Europe has made a promising start, and I am delighted that it has now arrived in Greece. We recently announced the first projects funded under the new European Fund for Strategic Investments:

- An innovative agri-food company will use a loan from the European Investment Bank to invest in research and development and grow its business.

- A guarantee from the European Investment Fund will help a bank in Thessaloniki to finance small and medium-sized enterprises throughout the country.

These are just the first projects, but they show the potential of what we can achieve if we manage to introduce this new logic of mobilising private funds.

As part of the Investment Plan, we have also set up a new Project Portal which is now up and running. It links projects and investors, and already lists around 40 Greek projects.

I mentioned funding but our support goes further and includes hands-on technical assistance: for reforms under the programme; for the management of the refugee crisis; and for new investment projects. We have set up an Advisory Hub which is now dealing with 50 Greek requests, and teams from the Commission and the European Investment Bank are now on the ground to help Greece realise this.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This evening, I have talked about Europe and its response to its worst ever crisis, and how the Commission is playing its part: by defending the European interest, by building bridges, by providing solutions. In short, by providing stability and direction in a time of uncertainty.

I deliver this speech here two days before the British people take their biggest decision in a generation. So let us talk about Britain.

History has taught us a simple lesson: Europe is stronger together.

We are more powerful when we join our forces. We are more secure when we look out for each other. We are more prosperous when we trade with each other.

All too often, we take for granted what we have built. Peace among countries that knew only war. Freedom that is guaranteed by the rule of law. Prosperity that is built on the planet's biggest internal market. A way of life that is the envy of the entire world.

This is the patient work of generations of women and men, and we could not have done it without the British people. Leaving the European Union would put all of this at risk. It would damage what we have achieved so far. It would diminish what we can achieve tomorrow.

To turn your backs on your neighbours and retreat into isolation would go against everything that Europe and the United Kingdom stands for. To leave would be an act of self-harm.

But tonight, dear friends, I have said more – and this was my intention – about this special country, Greece, which is close to my heart.

A country which stands tall and proud at the crossroads of civilisations, and which is open to the world.

A country which is deeply rooted in its own history – a history that began with ideas – which it shared with the rest of the world.

A country which is still young and embraces its modernity with passion.

Today more than ever, Greece is at the heart of the European family. And I am convinced, more than ever, that this family will stand together.

Long live Greece and long live Europe.

Σας ευχαριστώ πολύ, καληνύχτα.

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