

Speech of the EPP Lead Candidate Ursula von der Leyen at the Landesausschuss of CDU Niedersachsen

Hildesheim, Germany, 12th of April 2024

Dear Sebastian Lechner,
Dear Gitta Connemann,
Dear Reinhold Hilbers,
Dear companions from the European Parliament.

I would like to welcome Lena Düpont, the number one migration expert in the European Parliament,

David McAllister, our shadow EU Foreign Minister,

Jens Gieseke, he sets the traffic lights in European transport policy.

You are a great team and indispensable for Europe!

I am keeping my fingers crossed for Jochen Steinkamp and Caroline Czychon, on behalf of our other candidates in this election.

Dear Mathias Middelberg and dear Hendrik Hoppenstedt, I would like to warmly welcome you on behalf of our members of the Bundestag. It's great to see you again here!

Dear members of the Landtag of Lower Saxony,
Members of the Executive Committee,
the Presidium, representatives of the districts and associations,

Dear guests from the business world, from the associations,

And of course, I would like to extend a very warm welcome to the excellent team of the regional office at the Eilenriede.

It is a great setting for this event.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart!

It was important to me, after the election campaign kick-off in Athens last week, to hold my first campaign event here with you.

I am very pleased to be here today. And I am particularly pleased to see so many familiar faces.

It is an honour for me to stand here and ask for your support – once again.

It was the case back then, a quarter of a century ago, when I ran for the Ilten local council, the Sehnde town council, then the Landtag of Lower Saxony. Those were great times...

I will never forget how you – David McAllister – in the Landtag gave the then opposition leader Sigmar Gabriel a hard time. Christian Wulff ruled with a steady hand, and Hartmut Möllring held the purse strings.

As a young Minister of Social Affairs, I had to privatise the state hospitals. I introduced the multi-generation homes.

Then Berlin called. There was a lot for me to do as Minister for Family Affairs. The introduction of parental allowance and paternity leave, day care places, equal career opportunities for men and women. There were many political debates to be had.

Later, as Minister of Labour, the first industry minimum wages; as Minister of Defence, the Bundeswehr, the fight against ISIS; and now, for almost five years, responsibility for Europe.

What has helped me in all my offices and years, is my rooting in Lower Saxony. You have always supported me. Firm and grounded.

For me, Lower Saxony is so much more than family and home. The moor, the meadows and dykes. The Harz, the Geest, the Heide, the Wadden Sea. All of this is home and anchor for me. It is where I recharge my batteries and where I draw courage for all that we have to tackle in Europe.

And we have some very intense weeks ahead of us because there is a lot at stake in these European elections.

Everything that is at the top of the political agenda in Europe, also exists and is happening here in our beautiful Lower Saxony.

The world is changing.

We have to adapt our competitiveness to the new conditions. But we also want to preserve the nature of our homeland. We have to achieve the climate targets with the economy.

Young people will never forgive us, and rightly so, if we shirk this challenge. They also want to live with the Harz and Heide, the Geest and the Wadden Sea. We must preserve their homeland!

We in Lower Saxony are proud of the long gallery of Nobel Prizes on the walls of Göttingen University.

Together in Europe we are doing a lot to ensure that top European research also remains at the top.

This also applies to our key industries. VW has caught up enormously and has overtaken Tesla for the top position in electric car sales in Germany.

That's a good thing. We like fair competition. What we don't like is when China floods the market with subsidised e-cars. We are taking action against this. Competition yes, dumping no.

Salzgitter is a pioneer in clean steel. Also here we need to ensure fair conditions for competition. A huge issue for European heavy industry.

Lower Saxony is the number one agricultural state. The expansion of new energies and intelligent grids can turn Lower Saxony into Germany's power plant.

My greetings to the coast – no other region in Germany produces more wind energy than you. That, dear friends, tastes like the future. And that is exactly what the coming years in Europe are about.

What counts now is a clear course, and answers that work for people and our companies in everyday life. And these are provided by the Union and our European People's Party.

We stand neither for ideology nor for wishful thinking.

We stand for pragmatic solutions.

We believe in science.

We know that there is no competitive economy without climate protection.

But there can be no climate protection without competitive companies. We must work to ensure that the future of our industry remains here in Europe.

From wind power to clean steel.

From hydrogen to e-mobility.

From the circular economy to AI-controlled power grids.

Dear friends,

For this to succeed, we have to make it easier for our companies. More skilled workers. Lower energy costs. More digitalisation. Better access to capital.

Better integrated capital market union could generate up to 500 billion euros more in investments. Our proposals have long been on the table, I hope that now all finance ministers will pull together.

And we need to impose less on them and trust them more. So that they can concentrate on what they are good at – be innovative, create competitive products

and good jobs. This then also means less bureaucracy, simpler procedures and faster decisions.

And to ensure that someone is watching over it, we now have a new European SME Envoy. SMEs belong at the centre of our attention. They are the backbone of our social market economy.

We know what they can do. And we have confidence in them! SMEs can count on our support.

The same applies – and I am glad that you have taken up this point in your programme – for our farmers.

They get up at the first rooster's call. They work hard for the high-quality food that ends up on our tables. Their costs for seeds, fertiliser and energy rise from year to year.

But the prices they receive for milk, meat and grain fluctuate. The big players in the food chain are putting pressure. It cannot be right that farmers have to sell their food below the cost of production.

That is neither acceptable nor is it sustainable. We need to put the system back on a solid footing. The hard work in agriculture must pay off! And farmers themselves are the best ambassadors for the protection of our natural environment, if they are also adequately remunerated for their work. We have to get there!

And we have acted on the issue of wolves. We cannot simply stand by and watch as regionally, more and more wolf packs become a threat to livestock. We must enable the regions to carry out genuine population management. And that is why we are changing the European legal situation. We are simply adapting the legal situation to the reality. The protection status of wolves will be lowered.

Dear friends,

My third point is about security and defence. We all sense that our geopolitical environment is changing rapidly and radically. As a result, the risks for Europe are also increasing considerably. Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has called the European security order into question.

Breaking all the rules, the negation of a nation's right to exist – that is the declared policy of Putin. Anyone who talks and acts like that does not want to compromise. Those who talk and act like this want more than just subjugating Ukraine. Even if some people don't want to believe it – Putin's imperialism does not end in Ukraine.

Our response to this can only be a policy of strength. Whatever the cost. Because the price we would have to pay if Putin defeats Ukraine would be many times higher.

We cannot and will not allow Russia to defeat Ukraine. The Ukrainians are fighting with infinite courage and great bravery for their freedom and self-determination.

We can never match Ukraine's courage and determination. But what we can do, today and in the future, is to stand firmly by their side as democracies.

And that is exactly what we will do. Because it is the right thing to do and because it is in our common interest.

I am fighting for Europe to continue to staunchly support Ukraine. That we continue to provide Ukraine with training and weapons, so that the country is able to defend itself.

What motivates Ukraine to persevere despite the many hardships is the dream of Europe.

The people of Ukraine know that the accession process requires perseverance and far-reaching reforms. But if Ukraine continues at this pace, then one thing is certain for me: The future of this brave nation, which is standing up for our values and democracy, is in the European Union!

However, security for Europe means more than just support for Ukraine. As Europeans, we must do more ourselves, for our own defence.

For the coming years, this means that we significantly expand the capacities of our defence industry.

The guiding principle is clear: Europe must invest more money in defence, we must invest more smartly together, and, above all, we must invest at European level.

Only in this way, will we be able to modernise and augment Member States' armed forces to the extent necessary.

This is the only way we can effectively support Ukraine against the Russian military machine. And it is the only way Europe can develop and produce the next generation of military capabilities.

We want to make Europe strong, to preserve peace on our continent. We want a Europe that can defend itself.

That is why we want a Commissioner for Defence for the next legislative period. That is why we are in favour of a European defence union.

Because without security, everything that we have built up over 70 years in our common Europe, is in danger.

Dear friends,

When we talk about security, we must also talk about migration.

Hardly any other topic triggers such emotions.
Hardly any other topic is more important.

On Wednesday, we adopted the Pact on Migration and Asylum in the European Parliament.

I would like to thank in particular, Lena Düpont, for her excellent work.

With this pact, we are further strengthening Europe's external borders. We are ensuring faster and simpler procedures. But that alone is not enough.

Smugglers and traffickers make billions in business. They lie to people, rob them and put them in unseaworthy rubber dinghies. I was in Lampedusa and saw the misery.

It is high time that we take tougher action against this organised crime and better secure our external borders.

To put it bluntly: We have fulfilled our international obligations in the past, we are doing so today and we will continue to do so in the future.

But it is us, Europeans, who decide who comes to Europe and under what circumstances. And not the organised crime of smugglers and human traffickers.

That's why I travelled to Tunisia, to Mauritania, to Egypt. Because I am interested in pragmatic agreements and concrete steps.

We can develop common perspectives and interests with the transit countries and countries of origin. For example, on the issue of clean energy. On the subject of education. But of course, also on the issue of security and migration.

On the one hand, it is about legal and safe channels for those who want to work here, who are looking at our companies, and who have prospects of staying.

But on the other hand, it's also about returns, those who are not entitled to asylum. And here, something is lacking. This has to change. Not only because our local authorities are on the verge of being overwhelmed. But also because democracy is only strong when it delivers solutions.

Dear friends,

If we tackle the challenges and problems pragmatically, then people will not fall for the tricks of those who focus on anger, hatred and dividing society. Who do everything they can to stir up fear.

Our task is to contradict the agents of fear with facts.

And on the other hand, we would do well to gauge the moods.

The pace of digitalisation, global warming and military aggression are challenging people. That's why we have to show every day that democracy provides the better answers.

And we can do that.

Just think of the pandemic. It certainly wasn't the torchlight processions, barriers and tinfoil hats that defeated the virus. With solidarity and great medical achievements, we have successfully steered a continent of 450 million people through this difficult time.

Together, we have overcome the energy crisis. And together we are standing up to the Russian aggression and Putin's contempt for all democratic values.

Putin and the dividers in our societies have one thing in common: For them, democracy is in the way. They contribute nothing to it, and they have no interest in solving the real challenges of our time.

No answer to digitalisation, climate change, competitiveness. I am not surprised that the Czech secret service is currently investigating two candidates at the top of the AfD's list for the European elections.

They have long been agitating against the European Union. And they have never made a secret of their admiration for the democracy despiser in the Kremlin. They have carried his propaganda into our societies. Whether they have taken bribes for it or not... Their behaviour is destructive and ignorant to history.

Sure, our European Community is not perfect. When 27 countries and 450 million people work together, there are always things that don't go smoothly.

Then we have to work on them. But that should never obscure the view of what our Europe achieves. Our EU is one of the most prosperous and socially progressive regions in the world. No one has more trade agreements with other economic regions.

And no member state benefits more from the European Single Market than Germany. The AfD brings into play a DEXIT. Have they ever thought about what a setback that would mean for Germany? According to the IW Köln, it could cost Germany around 10% of its economic output. We can see it now in the consequences of Brexit.

Applied to Germany, a DEXIT – which the AfD wants – would mean a loss of prosperity of 400 to 500 billion euros a year. In the exporting nation Germany, an AfD DEXIT would mean 2.2 million jobs are gone. Is that the AfD's goal? They have understood nothing! The opposite is true!

Whether peace, freedom and democracy, climate change or digitalisation, no matter how big the challenges are...! As a community of 450 million people we have the better answers to offer. Because we can only solve these challenges together.

Europe has been a guarantor of democracy, protection and prosperity for 70 years. And it is this Europe that we want to preserve for future generations.

That is what we stand for in this election.

I am more convinced than ever that democracy itself is our greatest locational advantage.

When people in June go to the ballot box in 27 member states, it is a moment in which we renew the democratic foundations of our Union, in which we reflect again on what really matters to us.

You can do business anywhere in the world.
But where do people want to settle and raise their children?

Where the streets are safe.

Where they have prospects.

Where everyone has access to good education and culture – regardless of how much money they have.

Where there is lasting peace.

Where everyone has access to healthcare.

Where they can move freely, study and work across borders that no longer exist.

Where they can build something that stays theirs.

Where rule of law wins and not arbitrariness.

That is what our European Union stands for.
That is what the European People's Party stands for.
And that is what I stand for.

Let us win this election.
Let's make this Europe stronger together.

Long live Europe!