

EPP Lead Candidate Ursula von der Leyen speech at the Nea Demokratia Congress

Athens, 7th of April 2024

Mister President of Nea Demokratia, dear Kyriakos,

Dear friends,

It is great to be here today
among so many friends and familiar faces.

This is my first stop on the campaign
since I was elected as candidate in Bucharest.

And I cannot think of a better place to start than in Athens.

50 years ago
in this very place the protocol of the accession to the European Community was
signed here.

And as I often say to my dear friend Kyriakos

I am amazed by the work you have done since then.

And I wanted to be here in person
to congratulate you

and to say that you can be so proud of what you achieved.

And I am always just as amazed by the beauty of this country and its people.

Of its unique blend of cutting-edge modernity
and beautifully preserved antiquity.

And I always see this timeless tradition
living through the architecture in this great city.

Because just as Greek mythology, philosophy
– and above all –
democracy has shaped the lives of people through the centuries -

so has Greece's architecture shaped cities across the world for thousands of years.

And as I look to the Greece of 2024,
I am reminded of the distinctive columns – or pillars of ancient Greece,
that still stand strong across this country to this very day.

Because today, my friends,
Greece is a pillar.
Greece is a pillar of the international community and economy.

Greece is a pillar of NATO and of our collective security and support to Ukraine.

And Greece is a strong and proud pillar of our European Union.

And that is thanks
- above all –
to the people of Greece.

It is thanks to all of you here in this room.

And to all in Nea Demokratia.
Thanks to you, Kyriakos,

– and thanks to you all –

Greece's story in the last years is one of amazing recovery.

And I want to pay tribute to you for that.

It is not so long ago
that Greece was staring into the abyss.

But under your leadership,
Greece is now an economic frontrunner.

Under your leadership,
Greece's economy has outperformed the eurozone average.

And under your leadership,
Greece is driving growth and innovation.

It is attracting investment from across the world.

And it is home to some of Europe's fastest-growing startups.

And you have achieved all of this while supporting people where it matters –
their wages, their pensions, their daily lives.

My friends, there is no doubt:

you have done Greece proud
and you have done Europe proud.

Dear friends,

The key to Greece's transformation has been leadership, courage and trust
to deliver on the things that really matter.

And in this more volatile and more unstable world,
this is exactly what Europe will need in the years ahead.

We know it can be done.

Since 2019 we have shown what we can do when Europe is united and ambitious.

Together we overcame a global pandemic
ensuring that citizens in every Member States got their vaccines at the same time.

Together we pulled our economies back from the brink with NextGenerationEU
– and I want to thank Kyriakos for his invaluable leadership in making that happen.

Together, we are leading the fight against climate change with the European Green Deal.

And at the same time

we are showing true solidarity to those most affected.

We saw more than 10 countries provide support to Greece in battling the devastating wildfires in the Alexandroupolis region.

Just as we saw Greece help others in their time of need.

Together, we stood up to the energy blackmail of Putin and brought energy prices down.

And last – but far from least -

it was *together* that we delivered the pact on migration and asylum, turning an Achilles heel into a success story.

And I want to pay tribute to Margaritis Schinas for his skilful steer and great leadership in delivering on the pact. Margaritis, this is outstanding.

To be very clear:

We have fulfilled our international obligations for migration in the past, we do it today

and we will do it in the future.

But it is us, Europeans,

who decide who comes to Europe and under what circumstances.

And not the smugglers and traffickers.

My friends,

there is a lot at stake in the upcoming election.

Our peaceful and united Europe is being challenged like never before – both from within and from outside.

Russia not only tries to wipe Ukraine off the face of earth.

But Russia's aggression is broader, undertaking hybrid attacks against Europe for years.

Be it through cyber attacks,
or manipulation in social media
or instrumentalization of migrants.
And Putin's friends in Europe are trying to rewrite our history and hijack our future.

Whether in the guise of populists or demagogues.

Whether it is the AfD in Germany, the Rassemblement National in France, the Confederatia in Poland or others.

The names may be different,

but their goal is the same: They are trampling on our values, and they want to destroy our Europe.

We will never let this happen.

So my friends, in the days, weeks and months ahead our job is to fight back.

And that is why in this election

we are standing up for Europe.

We are standing up for democracy,
we are standing for prosperity

and we are standing for security.

We are proud to be Europeans.

And I choose the word security carefully.

Because it is clear that our next frontier is Europe's collective defence and security
– an issue on which there can be no return to innocence.

Kyriakos knows this only too well as the only EU and NATO leader to have suffered a direct attack when visiting Odessa with President Zelensky.

That shows Russia's ruthlessness. We need to step up European defence spending collectively.

Europe must spend more,
spend better,
and spend European.

Greece is among those leading the way, spending over 2% of its GDP on defence.

And you have provided invaluable support to Ukraine.

Dear friends,

as we all know war is anchored in Europe's history.

And as we also know, European cooperation on defence is not.

But just as war is not a thing of the past in Europe, defence cooperation must be the mark of the future in Europe.

And that is exactly what we will stand for in this campaign.

And as we make good on the European promise of peace,

so must we make good on the European promise of prosperity.

That means strengthening our social market economy and our competitiveness.

Our European Green Deal turned the fight against climate change into a plan for growth, clean industry and social fairness.

Now we need to continue supporting our industry and small businesses to implement it.

Just look at the startup ecosystems in places like Athens or Thessaloniki. They show the way in unlocking innovation, entrepreneurship and investment.

We will make sure that the future of our clean tech industry is made across Europe and right here in Greece.

Dear friends,

Throughout our history, Europe has never truly enjoyed security and prosperity without democracy.

This is why previous generations fought so hard for freedom from dictators and fascists.

We do not need to look far to see that this fight for our democracy is never over.

And it is here in the cradle of democracy that I am proud to stand with you and to stand up for Europe.

So let's roll up our sleeves.

59 days till elections start.

Let's stand up for prosperity,

Let's stand up for security and
Let's stand up for democracy.

And above all my friends, let's stand up for Europe.