

Frankfurt Am Main - 18th of May, 2024

Dear Johannes Winkel,
dear Leopold Born,

Mr Prime Minister, dear Boris Rhein - it's good to be in Hesse!

Dear members of the state government,
dear members of the German Bundestag,
and the Hessian state parliament,

I would like to welcome the members of the JU Federal Executive Board and the state executive committee, I would like to welcome our constitutional policy spokesperson Sven Simon from the European Parliament. And Michael Gahler – nice to see you again.

And also dear Lídia Pereira, our YEPP President, what a pleasure to see you here in Frankfurt!

On behalf of all JU candidates on the state list, I would like to welcome your JU top candidate, Anna-Maria Bischof.

And allow me to warmly greet Petra Roth. When I was young, you were a role model for women in politics. Thank you for cutting a path for us women in politics. You were a great role model for me and still are today.

I am keeping my fingers crossed for you for the European elections!

Dear JU members, I am delighted to be here at the JU Germany Europe Festival in Frankfurt. You have chosen the right place. Here stands the magnificent tower of the European Central Bank. In future, Frankfurt will also be home to the European Anti-Money Laundering Authority. Congratulations again, dear Boris Rhein, on your successful application!

Eintracht Frankfurt plays here under the club motto "in the heart of Europe". More commitment to Europe is not possible.

Here along the river Main, you can see how important our Europe has become for Germany. Hesse is full of strength. Its companies benefit enormously from the European single market. They have done well with Europe. But they also sense that things are changing. Competition is becoming tougher. Digitalisation and climate change are forcing companies around the world to rethink. Geopolitical crises are increasing around the globe. Other economic regions are closing themselves off. Trade conflicts are looming. These challenges are real.

At the same time, new opportunities and business models are emerging every day. We only need to look around us. The glass facades of the Frankfurt skyline not only reflect Germany's economic strength, but also Germany's ability to change.

Frankfurt has become Europe's capital of sustainable finance. Startups are emerging here that are working on clean and sustainable financial solutions. Boris Rhein said it: There are world-class pharmaceutical companies here.

Dear Boris, I visited Merck with you, a company that has been around since 1668. They have made it their mission that they are not only concerned with people's health, but also with the health of our planet. And Merck, along with many other pharmaceutical companies in Hesse, is today the spearhead of innovation. And a gigantic stream of data literally pulsates beneath our feet. It connects over 1000 networks. This makes it the largest Internet node in Europe and one of the most important in the world.

Dear friends,

You have chosen this location for the JU well. It stands for tradition, of which we are all proud. It stands for self-confidence and drive. And it stands for the future. That is what I want to continue to work for in Europe and I need your support to do so.

Dear friends, We, the Union, know that competitiveness is not a sure-fire success. We know very well that economic success does not fall from the sky. Especially not when the wind of competition is blowing harder. Now is the time to make it easier for our companies. They need more skilled labour. Energy costs must continue to fall. More digitalisation. Better access to capital.

And we need to dictate less and trust our companies more. So that they can concentrate on what they do best – being innovative, creating competitive products and good jobs. This also means less bureaucracy, simpler procedures and faster decisions. Europe needs less on a small scale and more on a large scale. That's why I want to abolish 25% of reporting obligations for companies at European level, without replacement. Especially for SMEs. SMEs are the center of our attention. They are the backbone of our social market economy. We know what they do. And we have a lot of confidence in them! To do this, we also have to give them air under their wings!

What our companies also need is technological openness and fair competitive conditions. It is unacceptable that we have high product standards here in the EU - rightly high standards, because people's health is at stake. At the same time, companies from outside the EU are flooding our market with inferior products that are not sufficiently controlled.

Think of fast-fashion or other consumer goods, for example. Big e-commerce companies like Shein and Temu that simply don't play by our rules. Or companies that benefit from massive subsidies at home and then push into our domestic market with dumping prices. Let's be clear: we are open to trade, but it must be fair.

This applies to steel as well as solar panels. For medical products, as well as for electromobility. These are the growth drivers of tomorrow. And dear friends, these growth drivers should create good jobs and prosperity here, not at the other end of the Silk Road!

What we move today, what we regulate today, will determine the economy of tomorrow. And above all, your future. And that is why I have introduced a youth check for all future legislative proposals. This means that every new regulation, every new directive, every law will in future be scrutinised to see whether the concerns of the younger generations are being adequately taken into account. Because your voice, the voice of your generation, must be heard. It's about your future.

Dear friends,

Europe's economic strength is one thing. We are doing everything we can to maintain it and orientate it towards the future. The future belongs to clean technologies. And we know that there is no competitive economy without climate protection. But there is also no climate protection without competitive companies. At the same time, we want to protect our nature and overcome climate change.

Europe is unrivalled. In the north lies the Wadden Sea World Heritage Site. In the Baltic Sea, we have the largest brackish sea in the world. To the south are the European lowlands with large moors. And Europe is rich in forests. From mighty coniferous forests in the north and east to the last primeval forests of oak and beech in central Europe and the cork oak forests of southern Europe. All these forests work for us. They bind carbon, provide wood and other products, and filter air and water. And the loss of this nature would not only deprive millions of people of their livelihood, it would also deprive them of their sense of home. That's why we need to find solutions to preserve nature.

And you, the young, would never forgive our generation - and rightly so - if we were to shirk this task. And that is why for me, dear friends, the protection of nature is not just a climate issue, but also a question of intergenerational justice. It's about your future.

Dear friends,

My third point is about security and defence. We all sense that our geopolitical environment is changing rapidly and radically. If Putin's cold calculations in Ukraine work out, we will no longer be safe here in Europe. Because anyone who talks and

acts like Putin does not want peace. And nobody wants lasting peace in their own country more than the people of Ukraine. We can never match the courage and determination of the Ukrainians. But what we can do is stand firmly by their side and provide them with what they need. And I am also aware of the many actions of the JU when it comes to standing by Ukraine. For this, dear friends, I thank you from the bottom of my heart!

And thank you, dear Johannes Winkel, for travelling to Ukraine. These are strong signals of solidarity that are needed!

You, the JU, are clearly and firmly on the side of Ukraine. That's great and I thank you for that.

We need this clarity and we need staying power. Even if it requires effort, even if it costs money, we have to invest in freedom and peace again. Because the price we would have to pay if Russia were to wipe out Ukraine and fundamentally question borders in Europe again would be many times higher. Europe must invest more money in defence. We need to invest more wisely together and not each member state on its own. And above all, we need to invest in the defence industry in Europe. We want a Europe that can defend itself. That is why we are in favour of a European defence union. And that is why I will appoint a Commissioner for Defence in the next mandate. We want to make Europe strong in order to preserve peace on our continent.

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.

Last month, we in the European Parliament adopted the Pact on Migration and Asylum. 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 are making billions in business. They lie to people, rob them and put them on unseaworthy rubber dinghies. It is high time we took tougher action against this organised crime. 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 we, the Europeans, who decide who comes to Europe and under what circumstances. Not the smugglers and traffickers.

That's why I travelled to Tunisia, to Mauritania, to Egypt. And recently I travelled to Lebanon. Travelling like this is not easy. But it is necessary if we want to fight the perfidious business of people smuggling at its roots. I am interested in pragmatic agreements, in concrete steps, common interests and prospects. Because we can develop these with the countries of transit and 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's about legal and safe routes for those who want to work here, who want to work here, who are want to work for our companies and who have prospects of staying. But on the other hand, it is also about returning those who are not entitled to asylum. There is a huge problem here. That 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. And that is what we, the Christian Democrats, stand for in this election.

Dear friends,

There is a fourth topic that I would like to address here. This is digitalisation and, above all, artificial intelligence. It offers huge opportunities and can help us to solve major human problems. From conquering hunger to curing diseases such as cancer. But there is also the other side. From deepfakes to mass surveillance. And that's why we need rules.

That's why we have developed guard rails for the digital world. And here Europe has gone its own way. We don't have mega corporations making decisions, what happens to our data – like in the USA. For us, it is not the access of an overpowering state that decides what happens to our data - as is the case in China. Our focus is on people. And it will stay that way in the digital age.

And it needs a digital infrastructure. I don't know if the names Lumi, Vega, Meluxina and Jupiter mean anything to you? And no, these are not Elon Musk's children. These are the names of some of the super computers that are in the EU today. In 2019, Europe was ranked 25th in the world when it came to supercomputers, lagging behind. Today, 3 of the world's 8 most powerful supercomputers are located in the EU. We want this to become a tangible location advantage for our European start-ups.

We are now making precisely this computing power available to our European start-ups. This will enable them to bring their AI ideas to market maturity. We are bringing semiconductor production back to Europe. Dresden, Magdeburg, but also new projects in Italy, Spain and France. We are talking about technologies that will shape the economy of the 21st century like no other. These are mega opportunities for Europe as a business location.

But it is also clear that no single European country can realise these opportunities on its own. And competitors outside Europe are doing everything they can to displace others. But we together - 27 countries and 450 million people - have the critical mass, the knowledge, the companies and the market to assert our independence in this area.

And, dear friends, only in this way, only together, can we build a strong Europe. By fortifying our own strengths, working together and expanding our independence.

Let me come back to the risks. Artificial intelligence only needs a 3-second recording on the phone to perfectly imitate a voice and your way of speaking for all conceivable content. The programmes for this are available free of charge online. Anyone can imagine how vast the possibilities for manipulation are.

I am particularly concerned about the increasing interference and manipulation from outside in our elections, our democracies and our entire society. Creating and spreading fakes is becoming faster, cheaper and more seamless. The work of uncovering disinformation and finding the people behind it is arduous. It's a huge challenge. That's why we have to respond on a large scale. We need class and mass here.

I therefore want to create a European protective shield for democracy. A protective shield, especially against digital interference and manipulation from outside. We need to join forces in Europe, at both Member States and European level. If the autocrats use AI to attack our society, then we use AI to strengthen the immunity and resilience of our society against manipulation. Because AI must serve people and not the other way round.

Dear friends,

If we tackle the challenges, then people will not fall prey to those who rely on anger and hatred and spread division in society. Those who do everything they can to stir up fear. Democracy is in their way. They are true Kremlin servants. The public prosecutor's office is investigating the AfD candidate for the European elections on suspicion of money laundering and bribery for Russia. He has been agitating against the European Union for a long time. And he has never made a secret of his admiration for the Kremlin's despiser of democracy. The AfD has brought his propaganda into our societies. Recently, the handcuffs clicked on a close associate of the AfD's lead candidate. The public prosecutor's office is convinced that the man is spying for China from within the European Parliament. And the AfD's young cadres are categorised as "definitely extremist" by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. This was confirmed again in court on Monday.

Dear friends,

Let me summarise. At war with our fundamental values. Propaganda for Putin. Spying for China.

Whether it's the AfD in Germany, the Rassemblement National in France, the Konfederacja from Poland or Wasraschdane from Bulgaria. The names may be

different, but the goal is the same. They trample our values underfoot and want to destroy our Europe. Dear friends, we will never allow that to happen.

Of course, our European Union is not perfect. When 27 states and 450 million people work together, there are always things that can be improved. We have to work on them.

But that must never obscure the view of what our Europe is achieving. Let's take Erasmus. 300,000 young people use Erasmus every year. That's 10 million since Erasmus was launched. A few years ago, a clever person in the European Commission calculated that we owe over a million babies to the Erasmus programme. I decided not to do the maths. But I made sure that the budget for the Erasmus programme was doubled.

Dear friends,

When people in 27 Member States go to the polls in June, including many millions of young people and first-time voters, it will be a moment when we renew the democratic foundations of our Union. It is a moment for us to re-focus on what is really important to us.

A great European, our Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, said 70 years ago:

"The unity of Europe was a dream of a few.

It became a hope for many.

Today it is a necessity for us all."

His words are not only topical.
They are also an obligation for all of us.

Therefore: 22 days to go until the election on 9 June!

Roll up your sleeves!

Let's fight together for a strong Europe!

And let's celebrate Europe today!

Long live Europe!