

Dear Andrej,
Dear Borjana,
Dear Dubravka,
Dear candidates,
Dear friends,

It is great to be here again in sunny Split!

This is also the week of your patron Saint Domnius. Thank you for inviting me! I have visited Croatia five times during the last five years. Each time, I am amazed by the progress Croatia has made under your leadership, Andrej.

This is a country of innovators and entrepreneurs. And your talent is now known across Europe. Your start-ups are successful on European markets. Your capital Zagreb attracts people and investments from all over the world. And this is only topped by Croatia's accession to Schengen and the Euro last year.

This is the amazing Croatian success story. This is the success story of HDZ and EPP. And this is the success story of a leader like you, dear Andrej. In the space of only three decades, Croatia has gone from bitter bloodshed, to being today at the beating heart of our Union. Ten years ago, when you joined the European Union no one could have imagined how far and how fast this country has grown.

That is due to the will of your people, to the sacrifices you made, to your commitment to European values, and to your determination to join our Union of peace, progress and prosperity.

Dear friends, I am happy to be with you to mark the beginning of your campaign for the European elections. This election is about Europe's future. And about our unity. We have shown the strength of unity!

Together we overcame the pandemic. We made sure that citizens in every Member States got their vaccines at the same time.

Together we saved our economies with NextGenerationEU. Croatia is frontrunner in using the funds of NextGenEU. You can see it throughout the country. Together, we are leading the fight against climate change with the European Green Deal. Together we started to address demography with our new demography toolbox.

I want to praise our Vice-President Šuica for her excellent work! Thank you Dubravka, great job!

Together, we are showing true solidarity to those affected by natural disasters. Europe stepped in with European support immediately after the terrible earthquakes here in Croatia. And together, we stood up to the energy blackmail of Russia and brought energy prices down.

So my friends, when Europe is united, we can move mountains. Let's show the power of our unity. The power to build majorities for a strong Europe.

Dear friends, Like you said when you had your Presidency in 2020: "For a Strong Europe in a world of challenges". This election is also about resisting enemies. Russia wants to tear us apart from the outside – as well as Putin's proxies who want to divide us from the inside.

We do not have to look very far to see how real and how existential the threat is. From Croatia, it does not take long to get to the Ukrainian border. I have crossed that border countless times since the start of Russia's war of aggression. And what we see on the other side is the brutal reality of war.

We will never be able to match the sacrifice of the brave Ukrainian people. But what we can do – my friends is standing by their side now and as long as it takes. Ukraine can count on Croatia. Ukraine can count on Europe. Croatia knows the devastation of war better than most. Because of your own recent history. My friends, our message must be loud and clear. Croatia has fought long for democracy, freedom and peace. These are our values worth fighting for.

And we will never allow anyone, to take these values away.

We will defend every single one of them: democracy, freedom and peace.

Dear friends,

Europe has all the reasons to be respected not only as the best place to live, but also as a Union that is ready and able to defend itself against anyone and in any situation. Europe will be and must be prepared, so that no force in the world dares to raise its hand against us. The starting point for this is simple. We have to do more for European security.

Croatia knows that very well.

Since two weeks ago, six Rafale fighter jets are protecting the Croatia sky! You are protecting the European Sky! You can be proud of it. The priorities are clear. Europe must spend more, spend better, spend European. We need military capabilities made-in Europe.

This is why, in the next Commission, I will appoint a full-time commissioner for defence. 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. Strengthening our competitiveness. Cutting red tape and shortening procedures. European entrepreneurs, must feel safe in relation to non-European competitors. If we protect someone from unfair competition, we should protect Europe and Europeans first.

We want fairness and reciprocity. No dumping.

There must be the guarantee for safe and swift business and entrepreneurship for Europeans in Europe. And I believe that a larger Europe is a stronger Europe. This is why the enlargement process of our Western Balkan partners is so important. It will stabilise our neighbourhood.

In this mandate we have taken historical steps.

Think for example about the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. It is based on the simple, but powerful idea of reforms and investment. Building on what we have achieved at home with NextGenEU.

And let me especially mention Bosnia and Herzegovina. Borjana, it is great to see you with us here tonight. Since we granted candidate status, to Bosnia and Herzegovina you have taken impressive steps towards us. The message coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina is clear. You are working so hard to join our European Union. So our message must be clear too: the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina lies in our European Union.

Dear friends,

It is 26 days till election starts!

We have to get the votes out!

So let's roll up our sleeves.

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.

Long live Europe.

Hvala Vam!