

Speech by President of the European Council Charles Michel at the 77th session of the UN General Assembly 23 September 2022

President, Secretary-General, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

In Senegal last December I met passionate doctors and researchers committed to saving lives. Thanks to international cooperation, they have set up a vaccine production centre at the Institut Pasteur, equipped with the most promising technologies.

A few months later, I met children in Borodianka, Ukraine. I saw in their eyes the horror of war, hearing stories of violence against women. Rape. Torture. Mass graves. Purveyors of death...

Hope in Dakar... Horror in Borodianka... Putting an end to horror and choosing hope: this is the promise of the United Nations. It was the foundation stone for the European Union. And hope is what we want for the whole world.

That is why the European Union is extending a hand to all those who want to cooperate for the common good. To honour the UN's promise.

I want to speak about hope. But regrettably I will first speak to you about a war.

Every war is a denial of humanity. And all suffering deserves the same engagement in response, whether in Yemen, Ethiopia, the Sahel, Myanmar or Ukraine.

The Kremlin launched a war against the Ukrainian people. And hundreds of millions of women, men and children are being targeted all over the world. Threatened with famine. Deprived of heating. Hit by soaring energy bills. The Kremlin is waging a hybrid war. A war that combines the violence of weapons with the poison of lies.

The Kremlin claims that Russia's security has been threatened by 'the West' for years. That is not true! The Kremlin is attempting – in vain, I hope – to mobilise the world

against an imaginary enemy. No-one has threatened, attacked or invaded Russia. And no-one, absolutely no-one, in Europe wanted a conflict with Russia. What interest would we have in putting the security and prosperity of everyone at risk?

The second lie is that this war seeks to prevent an alleged genocide of the Russian-speaking people of Ukraine and 'denazify' the country.

That is not true, and it is despicable. Genocide means concrete acts committed with the intention of eliminating, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic or religious group. So everyone, apart from the Kremlin, has failed to notice that massacres of Ukrainians are being perpetrated on a huge scale by other Ukrainians? And what kind of liberation leads to the killing to this very day of Russian-speakers and the devastation of the infrastructure of their cities?

The third lie is that the aggression against Ukraine is merely a 'special operation', not a war. That is blatantly untrue. This is well and truly a war. And the mobilisation announced a few days ago of hundreds of thousands of reservists simply proves this. Banning the word 'war' by punishing its use with up to fifteen years in prison does not change what it is. It merely betrays its shameful nature. This war is an unprovoked, illegal and unjustified aggression which aims to change internationally recognised borders through force, and that is not acceptable. And because we must stop the Kremlin's war machine, massive economic sanctions were unavoidable.

This brings me to the fourth lie: that the sanctions are causing food and fertiliser shortages. That is not true! It was Russia which – even before war broke out – unilaterally decided to drastically reduce its exports of grain and fertilisers, causing price volatility on the global market. It was Russia which decided to place a military blockade on the Black Sea ports, making maritime trade impossible.

It was the European Union which opened the 'solidarity lanes', that have already allowed more than 10 million tonnes of food products to leave Ukraine by road. And it was the agreement reached by Secretary General Guterres that opened a maritime corridor in the Black Sea to help bring global prices down and start the resupply of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. And today it is the height of cynicism that the Kremlin is again threatening not to extend the agreement concluded with the UN. Once again, it is the most vulnerable countries which will be the main victims. In fact, there is a simple solution to end this food crisis that threatens us: that Russia stops the war, withdraws from Ukrainian territory and lifts the blockade of ports.

Ladies and gentlemen, Excellencies, in this web of lies one moment of frankness and sincerity stands out: a year ago, in a written statement, Vladimir Putin declared, on the basis of historical rantings, that Ukraine is neither a nation nor a legitimate state. This is what is behind his thinking. He is fooling no-one, and sham referendums will not change a thing. In 1963, when the Organization of African Unity was founded in Addis Ababa, the first president of independent Mali, Modibo Keita, said the following: *'[I]mperialism is that manifestation of that will to domination of man over man, of a society over another*

society, of a people over a people, and the desire to impose at all costs one's own way of thinking, one's own way of life, and one's own method of political and economic development on others'.

Imperialism and revanchism. These are the bases for this war of colonisation which has Ukraine as its target, and which is deliberately flouting international law and the UN Charter, to the point of brandishing the threat of nuclear weapons and even using right now the largest nuclear plant in Europe as a military base. This must stop, it is not acceptable. We unreservedly support the efforts of IAEA director Rafael Grossi to restore security at the Zaporizhzhia plant.

Ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you and solemnly say to you that the EU does not ask anyone to choose between East or West, North or South. But there is a choice to be made. The EU's choice is for respect for borders over aggression. Cooperation over threats. The rules-based order over the rule of the strongest.

In 1948, in this forum, one of the EU's founding fathers, Belgian prime minister Paul-Henri Spaak, directly addressed the Soviet Union: *'We are afraid. Because in this Assembly you have made yourselves the champions of the doctrine of absolute national sovereignty. And because we ask ourselves [...] how an international organisation can fulfil the purposes assigned to it, if this obsolete and [...] reactionary doctrine triumphs'.*

Today, Russia is a source of fear. The Kremlin has brought war back to Europe. And it is behaving like a blackmailer.

We cannot allow the actions of one of us to shake our staunch collective determination to act for the common good. The European Union is reaching out, sincerely and honestly. We have so many challenges to face together. The effects of the pandemic are painful, especially for the most vulnerable. The Human Development Index is sliding backwards. All too often, women's and minorities' rights are still trampled on, or their very existence is even denied. Natural extreme events are becoming more and more frequent, as has recently been the case, dramatically, in Pakistan and Nigeria. The faultlines are cracking open: between developed and developing countries, between democracies and authoritarian regimes. The faultlines are also widening in our different countries.

Multilateral cooperation is collective intelligence in action. It is also the European Union's DNA. The European Union works as a force for peace, development and the promotion of human rights. European leadership is about building solutions together with you.

It is not for us to give lectures. There is no master, no pupil. It is in this spirit of cooperation that we act at the UN, G7 and G20 and everywhere else. That is why and it is with this spirit that we are reaching out with strategic partnerships.

Together with our African partners, we have reset the parameters. Our partnership is truly forward-looking and one of equals. And here let me reiterate my call and support for the inclusion of the African Union in the G20.

Japan and South Korea, for example, are countries with which we share so much, and we are strengthening our relations every day.

With India and ASEAN, we are expanding our areas of cooperation.

Our ties with the Latin American continent are natural ones. We are counting greatly on the 2024 summit to give a new impetus to our relations.

Together with the Gulf countries we are identifying our shared priorities and holding frank and regular dialogues on our differences.

We hope that the emerging powers, including China, will participate sincerely in collective efforts for peace and development. We believe in maritime security. We believe in stability in the Taiwan Strait. We adhere to the One China policy. But we will not turn a blind eye to human rights violations. Especially in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are in this forum, the United Nations, which brings together the peoples of the world, and we all know that a robust multilateral system requires mutual trust. However, the current system is not inclusive and is not sufficiently representative.

Use of the veto should be the exception, but it is becoming the rule. Reform is needed, as a matter of urgency. Let me share with you this conviction: when a permanent member of the Security Council starts an unprovoked, unjustified war which has been condemned by the General Assembly, its suspension from the Security Council should be automatic.

We support the Secretary-General's proposals on the Common Agenda, and the Summit of the Future in 2024 must serve as a game changer.

The European Union is committed to and stands by the people of the G5 for the Sahel. We are ready to develop resources for the Gulf of Guinea countries. We are also committed to and stand by Mozambique. We support the efforts of Rwanda and the SADC countries that are present here. And together with Josep Borrell, our High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the European Union is sparing no effort to try to reinstate the Iran nuclear deal.

The European Union stands by Afghans, especially Afghan women. We will continue to fight everywhere this obscurantism, which tramples on the rights of women and girls on a daily basis in all areas. And I am thinking now of the women and girls in Iran who are standing up courageously to defend their dignity, at the risk of their lives.

In Yemen a serious humanitarian crisis is unfolding. Yemenis have a right to peace. We support the efforts of United Nations Special Envoy Grundberg to transform the current truce into a sustainable ceasefire.

The peace agreements between Arab countries and Israel are a step forward in the region. But the Palestinian people have been waiting too long, in vain, for the slightest progress for their own future. We must not lose sight of the Palestinian people in the global landscape. The two-state solution, with Israel and Palestine living in peaceful coexistence, in which the security of all must be guaranteed, remains a priority.

Finally, I have personally taken on the role of difficult mediation between the President of Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia. The fighting must stop. The goal must be to resolve the conflict in order to establish lasting peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus.

Dear colleagues, leadership is about showing the way. But it is also about delivering results.

In terms of energy security, we have been far too dependent, for too long. We have jeopardised our security, prosperity and sovereignty.

Energy and climate change are two sides of the same coin. Overcoming the energy crisis means mitigating the climate threat. Protecting our biodiversity and oceans is about safeguarding our future. Climate neutrality is the compass of the European Union and at COP27 in Sharm el Sheikh we will push unreservedly to implement the Paris pledges, and to go beyond. We want a just and fair transition. No one country can protect our planet on its own.

The European Union is honouring its commitment to developing countries. And we expect all other developed countries to follow our example.

Today, almost a fifth of humanity is at risk of descending into poverty and famine. The Russian war against Ukraine has exacerbated this crisis. Initiatives are being taken, by the G7, by the European Union, by the African Union, and by others. The European Union is mobilising almost EUR 8 billion for food security between now and 2024.

But we know more is needed: more coordination, more money and more sovereignty. New, more resilient and more equitable agricultural models are needed. More food sovereignty is essential, particularly in Africa and Latin America. We are ready to extend our hand to support sustainable projects for fertiliser production on those continents, as we have done for vaccines to protect against COVID.

COVID-19 has opened our eyes to our strengths and our weaknesses. Vaccines were produced in record time. And under the leadership of WTO Director Okonjo-Iweala, a balance was struck between intellectual property, scientific innovation and universal access to technology.

However, we know that we need to learn all the lessons from this painful pandemic. This is why Dr Tedros and I, some time ago, launched the idea of a pandemic treaty to strengthen global health security. Negotiations on the treaty are ongoing and must be concluded.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude.

We are well aware that we are living through a watershed moment in human history. Sometimes we have abused this word 'watershed'; more than ever, we feel that the times we are living through are not ordinary or insignificant.

And I think of Winston Churchill. In 1946, referring to the failure of the League of Nations to avoid World War II, he said: *'The League did not fail because of its principles or concepts. It failed because those principles were deserted by those states which brought it into being, because the governments of those states feared to face the facts and act while time remained.'*

Like the European Union, the United Nations is a project of hope, founded following the horrors of two world wars.

A few days ago, my six-year-old daughter suddenly confided in her mother and me that she was afraid of war. And that sent shivers down my spine. No parent in the world can bear their child being afraid of war or even less their child being faced with it. No parent in the world can bear their child going hungry or unable to get medical treatment. No parent in the world can bear their child being deprived of hope of a dignified and fulfilling life.

Forestalling or preventing horror in Borodianka, Yemen, Myanmar and elsewhere. Restoring hope, like the doctors in Dakar, and elsewhere, is at the very heart of our responsibility as leaders representing the peoples of the world.

Differences there will always be, but the same blood runs through our veins. The same heart beats within us. We have the same dreams of education and freedom for boys and girls.

I believe in the virtues of collective wisdom. I believe in science and in knowledge and that they will put the world back on the track of hope. We must step it up. And that step up must be taken now and it must be taken together. You can count on the European Union. Thank you.