

04.07.2017

Speech by Prime Minister Joseph Muscat to review the Maltese Presidency during the European Parliament's plenary session held in Strasbourg

Thank you Mr Chair,

Thank you members of the Chamber. This is the third time I am addressing you during the past six months. I am pleased to say that every single experience was one I will not forget. But also a dialogue, from which we learned a lot.

At the end of the Presidency I wish to discuss what we achieved together. However, I would like my focus to go beyond what we experienced as a Presidency – which by the way was the first one in our history. But, as I said when we first met at the start of the Presidency, I wish for our contribution to transcend this small fraction in the great history of the Union.

My wish is that as convinced European politicians, we maintain our focus on how to improve the lives of our citizens and on how to be more relevant in the future than we are now. How to go about providing social assistance to people who are lagging behind. Giving more rights and full equality to every citizen. Making it easier to strengthen business, create better jobs for our youth. Because it is wealth that creates jobs. And jobs mitigate poverty.

We cannot fool ourselves. We still have a long way to go for people to feel better. As I will explain later on. We are still looking at solidarity as a monetary matter. Solidarity is really a humanitarian issue.

This is why I would like to discuss with you the future of Europe. Not simply a future of empty words. But how we are going to achieve a better tomorrow, not for ourselves... But for our citizens.

And this is what I want to leave behind – a chain reaction propagated as a philosophy, for the Estonian Presidency, which I'm sure will be a success, and for the successive Presidencies. This must be something we embrace together, all of us that believe in the principles of the European Union and this is a project that should last for the next sixty years and beyond.

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Antonio,
Jean-Claude,
Honourable members and colleagues

04.07.2017

I am here today to close a small chapter in Europe's history – but which for us Maltese, the smallest EU member, means a lot. Even though leading the Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers might not have a direct effect on citizens, the Maltese people feel a sense of pride. And every time we closed a dossier and Malta was praised, or even criticized, we felt part of something larger than the small island we live in. So let me start by transmitting the sense of positivity that the EU Presidency has brought to our country.

During the last six months we achieved a lot in terms of making a difference in people's lives. We closed important dossiers, ended roaming charges, introduced cross-border portability which affects apps we use daily, moved ahead on the Wifi4EU initiative. Other important dossiers which we closed were the Anti-tax Avoidance, the Double Taxation Dispute Resolution Mechanism, Better Protection for Workers from Cancer-Causing substances, rules on business to consumer contracts for the supply of digital content. The EU joined the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women. We have also seen serious advancement on gas security of supply, paved the way for 5G, and reached an agreement on the Malta Declaration charting EU's way forward.

These are important dossiers and initiatives which, if communicated effectively, can show citizens – even the most sceptical millennials – that the EU matters for them on issues like the use of Spotify through the available free Wifi connection, to women rights, enhanced workers' rights, up to facilitating future technologies.

I must stress that these are all positive achievements which we should be talking to citizens about in our daily interactions on media and when we meet our citizens face-to-face.

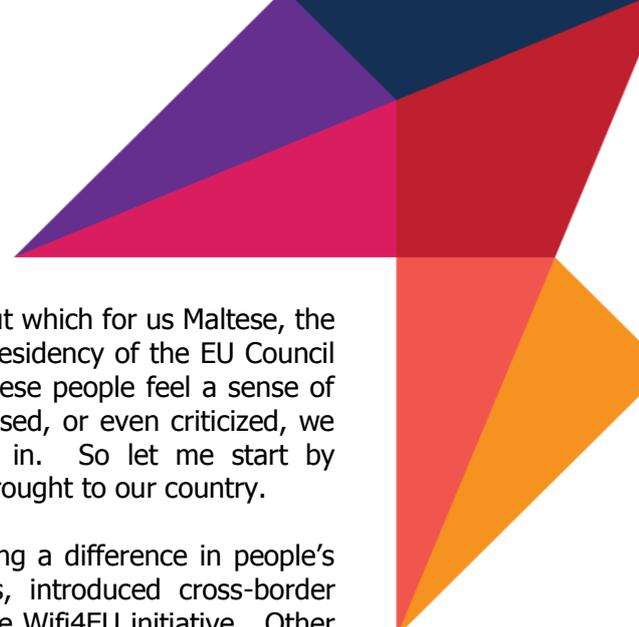
The Presidency however was also a stark reminder that there are issues which we are still at loggerheads about. Migration is one such area. For all the good intentions which we all declare in signed declarations, when it boils down to real, effective solidarity, we as Member States should all be ashamed of our record.

Countries who like us are now home to thousands of migrants. Countries who like Italy have seen hundreds of thousands of children, women and men reach its shores, look at Europe – particularly at politicians – and think: On this issue Europe has failed.

Do you blame any citizen in any country who feels shortchanged just because of the geographical reality they live in? How are we making a difference in these people's lives? Are we just blaming them for reaching out to extremist parties?

It is in this context that Malta supports the agreement on migration reached between Italy, France and Germany, in the presence of Commissioner Avramopoulos. We agree with more financial transparency for NGOs, more specifically on who is funding them. We agree on clear rules of engagements on how NGOs engage in Libyan territorial waters as well as total coordination by NGOs with the Italian Coast Guard. After all, our small island devotes 100% of its assets to cooperate with Italian authorities to save lives at sea every day.

In the absence of real solidarity by all Member States, no one should blame affected Member States for trying to protect their own national interest. But I am still positive we do not go down that route and I believe we can still show real solidarity. EU values are not a la carte, they are a set of principles which we all agree with and we should uphold.



04.07.2017

Our Presidency had to also deal with Brexit. This disastrous creature which all of us should have seen coming, but none of us managed to stop. We have collaborated with some of the best people in the field and here let me praise once again Michel Barnier's contribution and the excellent collaboration between Council, Commission, Parliament and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. But then again, what are we praising here? The terms of a painful divorce which millions of citizens would have to go through? What we are not doing enough once again is to avoid another possible exit of a member state.

This auto-critical analysis of our work should remain. It is not self-flagellation, but a reflection of the thoughts that people in our cities, towns and villages tell us.

There is another dimension which we should not discard. Europe does not stop with its borders. Our role in the world is as crucial and central as any other continent and has become even more so in the past months. We are at the forefront of certain issues that cut through oceans and forests such as Climate Change. In this context we must keep defending the agreement on Climate Change that was born in Paris and which spread from North to South only to find resistance now. Europe's role is not to open battles – but to seek to build bridges, by persuading each and every nation that our future depends on decisions we take today.

Europe must not close its eyes at what is happening just 60KM off the south of Malta, because Libya is Europe's neighbour as much as peaceful neighbours to the North, West and East of our shores. Development is an issue that Europe must lead on, not just by throwing money at a problem.

Our seas should be a force to unite the world. Our vision for the world must be to build bridges, not walls.

But first we must understand that solidarity begins at home and should be shown with the smaller members of our family, and those who go through a crisis. Together we have overcome many challenges. And if we heed our people we will once again rise to the occasion and bounce back on the crucial issues that effect citizens at workplaces, in our children's classes, in our hospitals and in our homes when families sit around the table to discuss their daily successes and failures.

Finally – a word of thanks to Council President Donald Tusk, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Parliament's President Antonio Tajani. Your constant support was the guiding light for our Presidency. Who would have thought that a small island of Malta's proportion – just half a million in population, the size of a medium sized European City – would have managed to chair hundreds of meetings and close very important aspects that affect the life of so many millions of Europeans.

I would also like to wish all the best to Estonia who take over the Presidency.

Finally, I recall a particular occasion when we were in Italy and Italian President Mattarella gave an excellent analysis of Europe when he said: "Europe is made up of small states, and of states that have not yet realised that they are small."

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