

Speech by Mr. Juha Pyykkö, Ambassador of Finland in Athens,
at the International Albert Cohen Congress in Corfu, June 2019

“Significance of the European Union to Finland
and Challenges and Possibilities for the EU”

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends of Europe,

I would like start by thanking the organisers of these festivities here, the Friends of the Mémoire Albert Cohen Corfu Association, for their kind invitation to me to represent Finland at this event and give a speech on the significance of the European Union to Finland and on the challenges and possibilities for the EU. It is an honour for me to be here to commemorate the late Corfu-born humanist, diplomat and author Albert Cohen.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European Union is a very timely topic for Finland as we are now celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Accession to the European Union by Finland, Sweden and Austria. The signing took place at the EU Summit held in June 1994 here in Corfu. There could not be a more suitable place to celebrate this now!

Finland has now been a Member of the European Union for almost 25 years. Joining the EU was a logical step in our integration efforts in Western Europe, and it benefited from wide support that continues to this day.

Our accession took place at a very special time. We were at the beginning of a process to get out of our worst post-war time depression. The Berlin wall had come down and the Soviet Union had collapsed.

Two themes dominated discussions prior to our EU referendum: security and stability - both politically and economically. Furthermore, people wanted to enjoy the practical benefits of the EU, such as free movement of citizens.

The EU remains very popular in Finland. Most Finns continue to support both the EU and the Euro, even during the sovereign debt crisis years. The values that motivated our accession are still valid.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We had Parliamentary elections in Finland in mid-April, and the new Government is now finalizing its preparations for the third Finnish EU Presidency during the latter half of this year.

Our national elections as well as the European Parliament elections in May gave us an opportunity to discuss the challenges and opportunities we face in Europe and more broadly globally. I am glad to note that our national debate on European issues has become more lively. This probably has to do with the big challenges on the EU agenda. I will take just a couple of examples.

The Euro area went through a historical challenge when dealing with the sovereign debt crisis. That is obviously something that you know very well here in Greece. During that crisis, we were able to come up with the necessary crisis measures, sometimes at the last minute. However, we are aware of the fact that the Euro area is not immune to further crises. We must continue to develop actions that are necessary to weather the next storm. The Euro is our currency and Finland will continue to play a constructive role in this process.

The migration crisis has been another test for our institutions and Member States – equally clear here in Greece. The Union was able to come up with preliminary crisis management measures but a lot of work still remains to be done. Finland has called for European solutions to migration and we have duly implemented the decisions we have agreed upon with our partners. The European Council has discussed further measures on multiple occasions but, unfortunately, progress has been slow. We must not give up.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

the European Union is founded on values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. It is no secret that these values are under attack in Europe and worldwide. It is now more and more common to hear claims that these values are no longer valid.

I do not deny the fact that we face real challenges. The world is much more unpredictable today than, say, twenty years ago. In addition, the biggest challenges we face are truly global. Climate change, mass migration, and volatile financial markets do not know borders.

The real question is whether we have to compromise our values in order to face this unpredictable world. My answer and the answer of Finland is a clear NO. We have to defend these values and make sure that there are consequences, including financial ones, if they are violated. To paraphrase a famous saying, nothing is possible without people, but, nothing is lasting without values.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

it is fair to say that the European Union is no longer as unified as it was when we joined it in 1995. Having said this, I have to acknowledge that the EU also is now different. It has a lot more Member States than in 1995.

Brexit is, undeniably, a cause and a conclusion of unpredictability and yet an enduring uncertainty for the Union. I would like to underline our position: Brexit has been an unfortunate process that has to be handled in an orderly fashion.

Some people have said that it is difficult for the European Union to agree on anything nowadays. That is a huge overstatement. We should never underestimate the value of the everyday work in the EU, nor should we underestimate the ability of the EU to find solutions in any crisis. The debates and discussions in the run-up to our national and to the European Parliamentary elections in the last few months helped us clarify the priorities we consider as absolutely crucial. The EU Summit at Sibiu in May was important in this respect. All this enables us to influence the future agenda of the whole European Union, and its institutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

in today's turbulent world, I would like to underline the role of the EU in the new global world order. As I mentioned earlier, security played an important part in the minds of many Finns who voted in favour of Finland joining the European Union. Has the EU lived up to our expectations?

The answer is YES. The EU is clearly one of the remaining pillars of the contemporary world order that was created after the Second World War.

We should always remember that the EU is a significant security provider. The Union's common foreign and security policy has been one of its clear successes. Finland is open to discuss how to further enhance effectiveness in this area.

In addition, the EU is also the biggest actor in development cooperation globally. It cooperates with many partners in all corners of the world. 92 per cent of the EU's external action financing is official development assistance. This is the groundwork we have laid for cooperating with our partners, both economically and politically, all over the world.

And in climate policy, the EU is the key actor in pushing actions in tackling the climate change. Our targets are innovative and ambitious. But, however, the latest IPCC report showed that they are not clearly ambitious enough. Finland will definitely drive this agenda forward during her EU Presidency.

Furthermore, I would like to emphasize the current state of international trade, in which we have seen tensions and the rise of protectionism. The EU is a global leader and has a strong voice in defending rules-based multilateral trade. For our companies, the competitiveness and common international rules are a major issue. There are plenty of on-going ambitious trade negotiations with our partners. I am hopeful that they will provide results that will show that free trade is alive and kicking.

I do not mean to say that all is well in the global system and we are doing all we can. Quite the opposite. It has become evident that our world order, based on cooperation and alliances, is in danger and it needs all the help it can get.

Dear Friends of Europe,

it is unquestionable that the EU has now been facing the most challenging year of its contemporary history. However, I remain optimistic that we can face the challenges ahead if we stay true to our values, appreciate what we have already achieved, and maintain a sense of ambition and urgency.

Thank you for your attention.