

Speech by Vice-President Jyrki KATAINEN on behalf of President Juncker at the Plenary Session of the European Parliament on the debate on the Future of Europe with Giuseppe Conte, President of the Council of Ministers of Italy

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President Tajani,

Il Presidente del Consiglio Conte,

Honourable Members,

Italy holds a very special place in the heart of our Union. It has given Europe so much and has been there from the very start, shaping our Union every step of the way.

It was Spinelli and Rossi, imprisoned on the island of Ventotene, who set out their dream of a “Free and United Europe”.

They called on the nations of Europe, so long adversaries, to come together to ensure that the mistakes of the past would never happen again.

After the war, De Gasperi became one of the great pioneers of European unity.

And in 1957, it was on the Capitoline Hill that the Treaty of Rome was signed and our Union was born with six founding Member States.

Sixty years on in 2017, it was once again on those same steps in Rome that the Leaders of our Member States stood side-by-side to renew their vows for our Union. This time there were 27 of them from right across our Continent – a sign of how far we have come.

I say this because Italy’s special history is one of the many reasons that it has such a unique and important place in our Union.

But I also say this because it shows that Europe moves forward – that Europe is at its best – when it has Italy and the Italian people at its beating heart.

This history must serve as a guide and as a reminder for our future.

To build a successful future for our Union, Europe needs a strong Italy at its heart, just as a strong and vibrant Italy needs a strong Europe.

We must build our common future together, in unity and in solidarity.

Always working with – and not against – each other. Talking with each other and not about each other.

And when it comes to building a true Union of solidarity, Italy is the best place to start.

It is where the European Solidarity Corps started its work, to help Italy rebuild following the tragic earthquakes it suffered in 2016.

230 young Europeans volunteered in Umbria and across the regions hardest hit, in addition to the 1.2 billion euros of financial support provided to Italy under the EU Solidarity Fund.

We all have seen the images of young volunteers from all over Europe helping to rebuild the ancient and beautiful church of Norcia.

This is the solidarity that builds our European Union today and that must continue to build our common future.

Italy itself has shown that same spirit countless times over the years.

President Juncker said it many times: Italy is one of those who saved Europe's honour in the Mediterranean at the height of the migration crisis.

And the truth is that some others were too slow to support the efforts of the Italian people.

But it is also true that Europe stood up and supported Italy in every way that it could.

Since beginning of the migration crisis to the end of 2018, the Commission made almost 950 million euros available to support migration and border management in Italy.

This includes 225 million euros in emergency support to fund border surveillance and search and rescue operations, to improve reception facilities, and to support all of the authorities and people on the ground.

Europe has been there for Italy.

And we should not forget Operation Sophia or the role of the European Border and Coast Guard: saving lives at sea is a joint effort. And here again, we need Italy.

Prime Minister,

It is also clear that Europe still needs to overcome its differences and find sustainable and responsible solutions. We can no longer rely on ad-hoc solutions.

We have come a long way since the peak of the crisis, with arrivals down by over 97% in the Eastern Mediterranean and 80% in the Central Mediterranean. 700,000 lives have been saved at sea.

But clearly we now need to finish the job and conclude the necessary reform of our asylum system. The Commission has put everything on the table and it is now time to move ahead. We need the full engagement of Italy if we want to succeed.

Honourable Members, Prime Minister,

Europe stands for peace and prosperity and we are all responsible to defend its value together. This is what we must start doing today.

That means deciding what we want Europe to achieve. And it means deciding where to invest, to have the biggest impact on the daily lives of Italians and all Europeans.

This is why last May the Commission put forward a fair modern and balanced budget for our future. A budget that is more efficient and more focused on the issues that matter the most to our people.

For instance, the Commission has proposed an almost three-fold increase in funding for migration and security to reach nearly 33 billion euros. And an increased, simpler, more effective and more flexible EU budget for external action will help build partnerships with countries in our neighbourhood and beyond.

This will be especially important for Italy as a country that has taken so much responsibility in this area.

We will invest in making our economies more competitive, more innovative and productive. Key for Italy will be the 50% increase in funding for research and innovation and the 9 billion euro Digital Europe Programme that will support Italy's digital transformation.

Investing in our future also involves investing in human capital – through education and training.

This is why the Commission has proposed a doubling of the budget to 30 billion euros for the Erasmus programme – the EU's flagship for learning mobility. We aim to increase support to all sectors, including Higher Education as well as Vocational Education and Training. In 2017, more than 65 000 Italians participated in Erasmus programmes.

In the next Multiannual budget, we will build on the success of the Investment Plan for Europe, the so-called Juncker Plan. Italy is one of the largest beneficiaries of the Plan with close to 58 billion euros of investment triggered in Italy's economy and over 215,000 small and medium-sized businesses supported.

The Juncker Plan has increased significantly private investment, but also public investment in Italy. It's a positive sign because we should not put

too much burden on the taxpayer, if private liquidity is available.

That investment is making a real difference on the ground, right across Italy:

70 million euro is helping to refurbish the local hospital in Treviso.

200 million is going into upgrading Puglia's water network to improve quality and access to clean drinking water for more than 4 million people.

And 500 million euro is supporting the rolling out of high-speed internet so that 7 million more households in Italy benefit from quality broadband access.

The new programme for the next budget, InvestEU, has the potential to go much further, by triggering altogether 650 billion euro of investments.

All of this can and will make a real difference on the ground in Italy and across our Union. This is especially true at a time when economic growth is becoming harder across some of the major European economies – partly down to global uncertainties but also because of domestic challenges and choices.

Economic growth needs confidence amongst households and investors. Trust is like oxygen – you notice it only when it is running out.

Uncertainty is a poison that seriously hampers jobs and growth. Italy's growth has been weaker than the Eurozone average for many years. This is a structural problem. Weaker growth means fewer jobs for the Italian people.

At the same time, and I say it at every occasion, Italy is among the most creative economies in the world. The future of your country is in your hands: do what is necessary to unleash this creativity and offer a brighter future for the Italian people.

Honourable Members, dear Prime Minister,

It is now two years since we presented the White Paper on the future of Europe which kick-started the debate we are having now on what we want our Union to achieve in the years ahead.

The five scenarios showed different possible paths that we could decide to take.

But whatever we choose there are some things that are constant – and one of those is Italy's central role in building our Union.

Europe needs a strong Italy. Italy needs a strong Europe.

It was no surprise or coincidence that the first lines of the White Paper were about Spinelli and Rossi's manifesto.

So, as we look to our future, we should all inspire ourselves from those that have gone before us to build a stronger and more united Union for generations

that follow – just as they did for us.

Thank you very much.