Speech at the Rome Congress of the Party of European Socialists

by Martin Schulz

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Thank you for your overwhelming support!
I am humbled and grateful for your trust.
I will do everything to deserve your trust!
I will do everything in my power to fight for our shared cause!

Friends,
We have come together here in Rome today, where our Italian friends have set out on making Italy stronger and fairer. Where Matteo Renzi has laid out an ambitious reform program to give Italy hope again!

We have come together here in Rome, where 60 years ago Europeans laid the foundation for a unique success story.
On a continent destroyed by a catastrophic war waged in the name of my nation.
We Europeans set out to realize a dream of humankind: a community of peace.
A community, where people live together in freedom, prosperity and equality.

We have come together here in Rome as a strong political family;
With strong leaders – we are in government in 19 European countries !
and with thousands of party activists from all over Europe. All passionately engaged in making their communities better for their friends and families.

Friends,
We have come together here in Rome,
because we know the next European elections are not just any election.
For the first time people will decide what kind of Europe they want!
For the first time the people will decide who will be the next Commission President!

On your behalf, I want to become the President of the Commission!
The first Commission President who is not the result of a backroom deal!
The first Commission President who is the result of a democratic vote!

Friends,
I am a German born in 1955 into a modest family as the youngest of five children. I grew up after the war in the border region of Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands.
And the generation of my parents were asked to make painful sacrifices: longer work hours, higher taxes, lower salaries, and no holidays.
And our parents made these sacrifices without complaining.
For their children.
They wanted their children to have a better future.

And we did - we had a life they could not have dared to dream about - born into peace and raised into prosperity.
Over the last five years, politicians of my generation have demanded similar sacrifices from people: lower salaries, lower pensions, fewer rights of workers and fewer public services, but higher taxes.

And for what?
Not for the common good.
Not for the future.
But to save the banks!
And our children are unemployed.
Governments all over Europe answered to the crisis with: "Pain for people, billions for banks."

As the result of wrong policy, people are suffering.
Homes have been lost, jobs destroyed, businesses crushed, schools closed and health care cut.
This medicine did not make us better - it made us sicker.
It has weakened our economy.

As the result of wrong policy divisions are widening.
Divisions within European countries.
And divisions between European countries.
Sadly, the crisis has not bound us closer together - but driven us apart.
Even in this very room we have people with different views. I hear diverging opinions from delegates from different countries on what most urgently needs to be done.

Populists are driving these divisions.

They blame other citizens for the crisis.
They feed nationalism.
They enflame old and new hatred.
They call to "close borders" or "kick out the foreigners". Seeking to turn nation against nation.
European against European.
It worries me deeply to see again the old demons.
Racism. Anti-Semitism. Xenophobia.
Demons we have held in check for so long.
Demons that have only ever brought disaster upon the peoples of Europe.

And yes, divisions within our countries are growing.
The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.
Today, 120 million Europeans live in poverty or under its threat.
That is shameful!
27 million Europeans who want to work cannot find a job. In some countries more than every second young man and woman is unemployed!
The young generation are paying with their life chances for a crisis they have not caused.
And women are hit hardest by the crisis!
That is a scandal in Europe today!

And I ask you, all of you who are in this room today:
Are we still able to feel the pain?
Do we feel the pain of a young man or a young woman who sends off 300 job applications and gets 300 No's?
Do we feel the pain of a couple in their fifties who lose their jobs and lose their home because they can no longer pay their mortgages and are told that they are too old to find a new job?
Do we feel the pain of parents who don't know where the next warm meal for their children will come from?

Only if we are able to share this pain, are we able to regain trust.
Only if we are able to share this pain, do we deserve to win elections.

To those who are disappointed with Europe.
I want to say: I share your disappointment. I understand your anger.
But direct your anger at those who put us all in crisis.

Not at other peoples and other countries.
The answer is not: "no" to Europe.
The answer is to fight for a better Europe. A Europe we will proudly claim as our own.
I want a Europe based on mutual trust and respect.
A Europe where countries work together on an equal footing.
A Europe where one country cannot claim primacy over others because of its economic strength.

As Commission President I want to redress the balance between rich and poor, large and small, between countries and within countries.
I want us to be partners and friends again in Europe.
I want to bring people together again.
I want to restore trust.
I want communities built on fairness.

Let us start today, in this very room to overcome these divisions. If we agree on this, we have already made a huge step forward.

Friends,
Having a job is about more than a pay packet. It is also about dignity.
I well remember the first day of my traineeship back in 1975, on the 1st of February.
I was so proud to be able to say that I was a trainee; that I would someday become a qualified bookseller!

And a few years later I opened my own bookstore. Never again did I have the same feeling of achievement and purpose as I had on that day.

This is why, as Commission President my first priority will be jobs - good jobs!
During the next five years, for every action we take in the European Union, we must be able to answer a simple question:
How will this help to create jobs?
What more can we do to give a real chance to our children?

In five years I want to be able to say to young unemployed I have met:
Yes, we succeeded, we have sharply reduced youth unemployment.
Yes, we have made traineeships a priority.
Yes, we have increased funding for the Youth Guarantee.

And I want to hear from them: Yes, we did find a job.

In five years, I want to say that we are closing the gender pay gap and more women are holding top jobs; because I want my daughter to have the same opportunities my son has.
Inequality between men and women is a scandal in Europe in the 21st century!

In five years, I want to say to all those who are toiling away for slave wages:
We have ensured fair pay for everyone, because we fought social dumping and introduced a European system of minimum wages tailored to each individual country: enabling people throughout Europe to live in dignity!

To create jobs we must get the European economy back on track.
That will not be easy.
What has been lost during the crisis is not just a matter of GDP and production quotas; we have also lost our optimism about our future, the sense that our economy is built on fairness, and that hard work is rewarded.

As Commission President I want to focus on boosting small and medium-sized businesses, overcoming the credit crunch, promoting the smart re-industrialisation of Europe and investing in the ecological and digital economy!

Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of our economy.
They have the potential to create millions of jobs - if we help them!
And I want to help them.

I was myself just such a small business owner, with my bookshop in my home town.
I told you my proudest day was the first day I turned the key in the front door to open that business.
Twelve years later I passed on ownership of this bookstore to one of my employees.
That also gave me pride; in the business we had built up and the business that would go on.
This bookshop still exists today and continues to give people a job.
It's a small example of how that backbone of our economy is based on trust, shared interests and strong communities.
And I will show that trust.

Friends,

The crisis has driven home this lesson: Industry is the cornerstone of our economic success and our prosperity.
And we risk falling behind if we don't act boldly.

There is work to be done now to lay the foundation for new growth, new prosperity, new quality jobs and huge savings.
As Commission President I will renew our commitment to research and innovation.
I will redirect EU funds to science and training.
Because the future of our continent depends on a smart and sustainable reindustrialisation policy:
On using the sun and the wind to fuel the energy needs of our homes and factories.
On fuel-efficient cars and cheap solar cells built here in Europe.
On robotics and fibre optics to make us competitive.
On electric grids and infrastructure on and off-line to connect us.

We must support our industry within the EU!
And we must defend our industry with the help of the EU against international competition!
We can not allow our countries to be played off one against the other!
As Commission President I will protect our social and environmental standards and our interests in trade agreements.

In five years, I want to be able to say we have made Europe once more the prime location for business and industry with smart new products developed in European labs, manufactured in European factories by European workers and shipped from European ports to the rest of the world!

Friends,
As Commission President I want to put fairness back at the heart of our policies!
For too long, greed has been rewarded before hard work.

The scandal of tax fraud and tax evasion is cheating society out of one trillion Euros a year - money we desperately need for children and our elderly, our hospitals, our schools, our universities, our roads and railways. Tax fraud is a serious crime, one that undermines solidarity within states and among peoples - It is not acceptable that big corporations make billions in profits but pay no taxes!

In five years I want to say to every taxpayer:

We have cracked down on tax havens at home and abroad!
The Financial Transaction Tax has become reality!
We don`t need a European Finance Ministry to implement the principle that the country of the profit is the country of taxation!

Friends,
For too long, we have been told, that the invisible hand regulates markets, that we cannot tame financial markets.
But we can - and we must!
We can regulate and supervise banks.
We can separate retail banking from speculation.
We can break the toxic link between bank debt and state debt.
We can stop dangerous speculation that is putting our economy at risk.

In five years I want to be able to say to the citizens who had to bail out banks: It will never happen again, we have made banks safe.

My Europe is a Europe that puts citizens first!
Our Europe is a Europe that puts citizens first!

People have the right to expect their food, their clothes and their toys to be of high quality.
As Commission President I want to safeguard our high consumer protection, our social and environmental standards - so that our children are safe.

People rightly want the EU to help ensure that their data is properly protected.
We do not want to live in the knowledge that our most private thoughts are spied upon by secret services beyond any control.
Or by businesses set on making money with our data.

I am convinced that it is upon us the socialists and social democrats to protect the people!
We have always fought for the dignity of human beings!
We have humanised the emerging industrialised society!
We are called upon to civilize this technological revolution, too!
So that the many and not the few benefit.
So that our data is protected!
The protection of personal data is a cornerstone of our very identity as free individuals!
This is why, as Commission President I will make a "bill of digital rights" my priority!

My Europe is a Europe that protects the rights of its citizens.
Our Europe is a Europe that protects the rights of its citizens.

Friends,
Recently free movement has come under attack. Populists are merchants of fear and hate. They have painted the picture of a massive influx from one part of Europe to another part of Europe - taking away jobs, living off social security and lowering wages.

As Commission President I will never accept that we have first and second class European citizens!
I will never accept that we close borders again!
And I don't say that we do not have problems we must deal with.
But people wanting to work are not the problem.
The problems are rules that allow people to be criminally exploited!
Rules that allow people to slave away at famine wages!
Thereby undermining our worker's rights and social standards!

We have to change the rules! - Not take away people's rights.
We have to change the rules! - Not close the borders!

In five years, I want to say to the worker who fears for her job because of cheap labour and to everyone who is exploited:
We have fought wage dumping!
We have achieved equal pay for equal work at the same workplace!

To the thousands and thousands of trade union organisers in the workplace, I say I understand how hard your job has become.
And I understand that you are as passionate as I am about equality!
I say to you that in my Commission, social policy will be restored so that workers and employers can start a real conversation.

Friends,
Some of you know that I was for many years the mayor of a town in the border region between Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands.
This is where I come from.
This is where I have my roots.

This is where I still live with my family today.
During these years as a mayor, I learned one important lesson:

Being a mayor is not about big ideological discussions. It's about finding practical, pragmatic solutions for the everyday problems of people.
Sitting down with the work councils and the entrepreneurs, the clergyman and the teacher to find solutions for the needs of the people.
As a mayor I had to make sure that someone collects the rubbish, repairs the traffic lights and drives the school bus.
And a mayor will do a better job if he or she listens closely to the people, learns what their everyday worries and big concerns are.

So I learned that decisions are better, more transparent and more democratic the closer they are taken to the people.
This is why, as Commission President, I will change the way the Commission works; what it does and how it responds to political priorities of people and their representatives. For many the EU has become a synonym for the actions of the Troika and for austerity. I want to change this!

Europe is more than the sum of its Brussels-based institutions. Europe is the sum of its nations, of the hundreds of thousands of municipalities, of its regions, of its 28 Member States - and of course, above all our five hundred and seven million fellow European citizens!

My Europe is built from the bottom-up!
I strongly believe that everything that can be better done on a local, regional or national level - should be done on a local, regional or national level.
I don't want the EU to do everything.
I want the EU to act where it brings value to its citizens!
Because together we are stronger!

Friends,
We who often criticise the EU are just in these hours dramatically reminded by our neighbours that Europe remains the promise for a bright future!
The Ukrainians on Maidan square who stood up for democracy and freedom were waving the European flag!
The people on Maidan square were waving the flag of our European community of peace.

Where enemies became friends,
borders were opened and walls torn down,
and nations shook off the oppression of dictatorships to become democracies.

The people on Maidan square were waving the flag of our European community of values;
built on democracy, human rights, the rule-of law, the freedom of speech and freedom of press.
a society where child labour and the death penalty have no place.
a society which puts people at its heart!
I want my children and my children`s children to live in this kind of society.

And I want Europe to remain a shining light of hope for all those struggling for freedom and democracy!

Friends,
The people have won their right to choose the next President of the European Commission.
They have won the right to vote for the kind of Europe they want.
And socialists and social democrats must protect their right to choose.
Because there are those who cynically say: "No, it does not really matter what the people vote for, it does not matter who wins the majority in the European Parliament - the President will be selected behind closed doors in a deal, just the way it has always been."
This is wrong. This is cynical.

For sure, I'm not the most likely candidate for a backroom deal.
I'm a bookseller, a small town-mayor who comes from a modest family.
Not a former head of government. I'm a representative of the people who wears his heart on his sleeve.

But many people still don't seem to understand: the rules are changed forever!
We socialists and social democrats stand up for up for democracy in Europe!

The next Commission President will be elected - not appointed behind closed doors.
I want to become the President of the European Commission by winning the trust of European voters!
I want to convince people of my program, my ideas.
And I will travel to towns and villages all over Europe.
Knock on doors and talk to people about my ideas.

Because there is only one deal I want - and that is a deal with European voters!

Friends,
We have come together here in Rome, because
we want a better Europe,
a Europe that makes the lives of people better!
a Europe that holds the promise for a bright future!
I have the heart and the resolve to fight this fight.
But I can't do it alone.
I say this to you: to each and every one of you:
if it's the first time you will be voting or if you have wavered, feeling the Left has lost its foothold over the last years: it's time to come home!

If only some of those who did not vote last time, vote for us this time - we will win!
It's time to join, to organize, to act, to get out there and knock the vote!

We have come together here in Rome to carry our passion for Europe, a Europe that is fair, social and strong, out onto the streets of every city and into the homes and the hearts of the people.

Our movement is the heart of thousands of communities across Europe.
We know people's daily challenges because we face them side by side.
And this connection, this grounding in everyday life, will lead to a massive mobilisation at the end of May.

It is now for us, to fight for Europe, a humane Europe, a Europe that is social and democratic - a social democratic Europe!