STANDPUNKTE Nr. 13

ALAIN BERSET

FROM ZURICH TO STRASBOURG: EUROPEAN UNITY IN A TIME OF WAR AND RUPTURE

**There can be no peace without reparations.
No reparations without justice.
And no justice without law.**

EIZ Publishing

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Verlag: EIZ Publishing (eizpublishing.ch), Bellerivestrasse 49, 8008 Zürich,
eizpublishing@europa-institut.ch
Speech: Alain Berset

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36862/6CS3-JCSG
Version: 1.00 – 20261105

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From Zurich to Strasbourg: European unity in a time of war and rupture

Alain Berset*

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, es ist mir eine grosse Ehre, heute Abend hier bei Ihnen zu sein. Albert Einstein, der einst Professor an diesem Haus war, soll gesagt haben:

> "Im Falle eines Weltuntergangs wäre ich am liebsten in der Schweiz. Dort geschieht alles etwas später."

Ich war zwölf Jahre lang Mitglied der Schweizer Regierung. Ich kann das bestätigen. Only in this hall was Einstein wrong. In Zurich, Europe happened earlier than anywhere else.

Idea to Reality: The Photograph

I arrived in Strasbourg two years ago this week. One of the first things I saw was a photograph of Churchill outside my office. I have passed it every morning since. Black and white. Place Kleber, 12 August 1949. Churchill in front of a full square. Less than three years earlier, in this hall, he asked for a Council of Europe. By the time that photograph was taken, it existed. Three years between an idea and a reality. I look at that on the mornings when nothing seems possible. He opened that day by warning the crowd:

> "Prenez garde, je vais parler en français."

Nobody left. It is the bravest thing a British politician has ever done. A Swiss politician would have asked for a referendum first. He took a risk with my language. It is only fair that I take one with his.

Vision to Power

Let me begin with the thing I keep coming back to. Churchill stood in this hall with an idea and no power. We have the power. I am less sure about the idea. It was September 1946. Europe had torn itself apart twice in thirty years.

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* Alain Berset, Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

The rules meant to prevent it had failed, and nobody could say what would replace them. The leaders who would answer that question were all out of office. Churchill had lost an election. De Gaulle had resigned in January. Adenauer had been dismissed as mayor of Cologne by the British the year before. They held no power at all. They held a proposal, and Churchill warned this hall it was about to be astonished. Eighty years on, Europe is living through another rupture. I will come back to that later.

In 1946, they had no power and they knew what they wanted. Today we have the power, and we have stopped saying what we want. That is the question I want to put to this hall tonight. Power and vision.

The Wrong Churchill

There is a plaque in this hall with Churchill's words on it. For twenty years, it ended with a sentence he never spoke:

> "Therefore I beg you that Europe arise."

The NZZ printed it that way. The plaque copied the newspaper. No one checked the tape. On the fortieth anniversary of the speech, the university took the plaque down, turned it around and engraved the right words on the back:

> "Therefore I say to you let Europe arise."

Churchill did not beg. The man on the recording was not asking anyone's permission. Anniversaries do this to speeches. We engrave them, we hang them on the wall and we stop listening. We have spent eighty years hearing Zurich as the start of a story we already knew.

So tonight let us do what this university did. Go back to the recording. Then measure it against what Europe has become.

Disarm to Rearm

Churchill began with disarmament. He said:

> "Germany must be deprived of the power to rearm and make another aggressive war."

He was asking how to disarm. Every European capital is now asking the opposite. We argue about budgets. Almost nobody asks who will be holding the weapons in ten years. I want to be clear: this rearmament is necessary. Russia

is more aggressive and America is less present. Pretending otherwise would be a comfortable form of dishonesty. But governments change. What happens in ten years if an extremist government controls a heavily armed state?

Saxony-Anhalt voted two weeks ago. Ten years ago, that result would have been unthinkable. Today, it surprised nobody. France, Spain, Italy and Poland all vote next year.

The weapons we are building today will outlast the governments that ordered them. Now imagine a graph. One line is Europe's defence spending, rising steeply. The other is trust in democratic institutions, falling, year after year, across our continent. No army on this continent is large enough to keep anyone awake at night. Not yet.

What kind of security are we buying for hundreds of billions, while trust in democracy keeps falling? Think about 1914. A pretext was enough, because everything else was ready. When a continent is armed and angry, a pretext is never hard to find.

Force to Authority

Churchill anticipated this in 1950. On 11 August, he called on the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe to create a unified European army, "subject to proper European democratic control." Adopted the same day, by 89 votes to 5. The Committee of Ministers replied that defence did not fall within our competence. Europe rarely argues about whether to hold force. It argues about who controls it and by what authority. At the Council of Europe, we call this democratic security. Independent courts. Transparent elections. Free media. And the capacity to confront cyberattacks, terrorism, and foreign interference in our democracies. And here is the trap. Democratic security is not cutting back freedoms in the name of protecting them. It is reinforcing the institution I have just described.

This is what the Council of Europe is for, and we have no soldiers.

Reparations before Peace

What we have instead is law. Why does it matter? There can be no peace without reparations. No reparations without justice. And no justice without law. Churchill understood that order. In this hall, he asked for two things. That Germany be disarmed. And that "the guilty must be punished." Only then, he said, could there be an end to retribution. He could ask for it in that order because the punishment was already under way. Twelve days after his speech,

the judges at Nuremberg delivered their judgment. Nuremberg judged a war that was over. We are doing it while the war in Ukraine goes on. The Council of Europe is building accountability where none existed before. A Register of Damage, the legal memory of this war. A Claims Commission to turn that memory into reparations. A tribunal for the Crime of Aggression, the crime that made all the others possible.

And we started a long time ago with the European Court of Human Rights. It is still the only international court judging the human rights violations of this war.

Convergence

In this hall, Churchill said:

> "the first step in the recreation of the European family must be a partnership between France and Germany."

One year after the war, that was unimaginable. Reconciliation is harder than revenge. Europe needs that imagination again. In the South Caucasus. And wherever else it is needed. What does the graph look like if the line is law? A whole continent is converging on the same rules. That convergence is what makes reconciliation possible. It needs something both sides can trust and neither side owns.

I was in Dublin in April. Thirty years of violence ended in 1998, when both communities agreed to be bound by the same rights. Those rights are in the European Convention on Human Rights. Dayton did the same. The Convention has been central to Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional order ever since. Neither side had to trust the other. Both had to trust the same Court. That is the Council of Europe's common legal space. There is nothing like it anywhere. It grows inside national law. When the Court in Strasbourg rules against a state, that state changes its own legislation. Forty-six countries, one Convention, one Court. They share the same legal DNA. What it returns is stability.

In January 1963, in Paris, de Gaulle and Adenauer signed a treaty of friendship between France and Germany. This common legal space was built for the reconciliations that look impossible. We are ready for Ukraine.

Rupture and Opportunities

This is exactly where Churchill ended his speech here eighty years ago. With a list. A list of things that looked impossible from where he stood. France and Germany to lead. Britain, America and, he trusted, Soviet Russia as the friends

and sponsors of the new Europe. Read that list again tonight. The two countries he asked to lead were the impossible part. It is the part that worked. The sponsors have been harder. Russia joined the Council of Europe and was expelled after invading Ukraine. America is turning away from Europe and, at times, against it. France and Germany, the old enemies are allies. And America, the old ally no longer acts as Churchill counted on. And the order they built together is in rupture.

Order to Rupture

Churchill had nothing. We have everything, and the order he proposed here, the only one most of us have ever known, is already behind us. Ukraine. Gaza. Greenland. Iran. Every threat or use of force that goes unchallenged writes the rules of what comes next. And force is contagious. It works its way back into our democracies and weakens the rule of law from within. Elections are becoming easier to influence and harder to trust. And states that helped write the Convention are now asking questions about it. All of this while artificial intelligence moves faster than our democratic safeguards.

This is the deepest break in the European legal order since it was created, and it is happening to a generation that found these institutions already standing. Churchill's audience had lived without law. Most of us have only lived with it.

Regionalism Works

So what does Europe do when the great powers no longer agree? Churchill answered that here, in the part of the Zurich speech nobody quotes. Regional groupings, he said, "do not weaken, on the contrary they strengthen, the world organisation. They are in fact its main support." The United Nations was one year old.

Today, when the Security Council cannot act, the question is who does. Either the regions carry the weight or nobody does. The Council of Europe has built a common legal space, with treaties that do not stop at our borders. The first binding international treaty on artificial intelligence was negotiated in Strasbourg, open to any country that wants to sign it. The next one should be on the environment.

Prime Minister of Canada, Mark Carney, has argued that the middle powers can no longer wait for the great powers to agree. He is right, and Europe should say so out loud. What brings us together is more than geography. It is democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Canada reached the same conclusion from the other side of the Atlantic.

Churchill's partners came with the war he had just won. Ours chose us. Next Monday, I will be in New York to open a Council of Europe office. It is a small office. Its purpose is not. Churchill imagined a European group as the main support. We built it. Now we should act like it.

Principles and Rules

Churchill knew what happens when we don't. The League of Nations, he said, did not fail because of what it stood for. It failed because the states that built it abandoned it, "because the governments of those states feared to face the facts and act while time remained." And then his warning:

> "This disaster must not be repeated."

At Buchenwald, they said it in two words: never again. There is an obvious reading of that. lnstitutions are not brought down by their critics. They are let go by their founders on the day that holding on becomes expensive. There is a second reading, and it is the one I came to Zurich to give you. You can abandon something by walking away from it. You can also abandon it by keeping it, praising it at anniversaries, and never asking it to do anything difficult. This is sentimentalism. There is another way: a pragmatic one, based on dialogue and strengthening institutions through law. In July, the Venice Commission was in Budapest, at Prime Minister Magyar's invitation, working on constitutional reform through law and expertise. The Venice Commission is the largest gathering of experts in constitutional law in the world. Sixty-one countries, on four continents.

Now take migration. In May, in Chișinău, the member states of the Council of Europe adopted a declaration on migration by consensus. This declaration took the concerns of governments seriously. It kept the independence of the Court. It protected the rights of everyone within the Court's jurisdiction. Then came Ceuta at the end of July. Tens of thousands crossing in a single day. More than a hundred dead. Within a week, the argument in Europe was about blame. A continent that cannot talk about migration without dividing is a continent that others can divide. Chișinău is the proof that we can talk about it. Ceuta is the proof that we have to.

A Living Plant

Europe decides its security in one room and its values in another. It is the same room. The distinction between hard and soft security belongs to the last century. lnstead, we need democratic security. It begins with institutions people

can trust and democracies that can resist pressure. None of that can be built in an electoral cycle. Churchill knew it. Four years after Zurich, he said of the Council of Europe:

> "We are not making a machine. We are growing a living plant."

Eighty years later, it is still growing. We are transforming the Council of Europe to meet what democratic security demands. Anticipation and early warning. Political, ministerial and emergency formats. Good offices and legal support through a crisis. As crises accelerate, politics collapses into the very short term. We are pushing in the opposite direction. We cannot settle for what is politically achievable. Our task is to build what Europe needs: a legal and democratic framework that lasting European security can depend on. And to hold to the same standard everywhere, because the moment standards become negotiable, unity is the first thing to go.

Conclusion

Eighty years ago, Churchill's answer to a broken Europe was to build the Council of Europe. His words are on the wall here.

> "Let Europe arise"

Not beg. Not Wait. Arise.

Tonight, they are the only instructions Europe needs.

Thank you.

Statements by students of Realgymnasium Rämibühl Zürich, Zunfthaus zur Meisen, 16. September 2026

Annatina Holitscher, 6b

Dear Mr Berset, dear Mr Quinn, dear Mr Kellerhals, dear all, Grüezi mitenand.

Four score years ago, Churchill pointed to Switzerland as the example of what a free country looks like. He also said that "small nations will count as much as large ones", but only if they are willing to contribute to a common cause.

I am eighteen. My generation did not choose digitalization; we inherited it. The model that could write my essays: designed in California, regulated in Brussels, built in Taiwan and finally delivered to my phone in Zurich. The entry-level job that may be gone before I even apply. And yet the same technology can do enormous good, in medicine and in education. That is precisely why there is no reason to fear. But there is a reason to show up.

In 1946, Switzerland gave Europe a hall. This time, a hall is simply not enough. Next year the world's AI summit comes to Geneva. That is our seat at the table, and we must take it, bringing our humanist tradition and a culture built on safety and trust. These are not soft values. In the age of AI, they are the guardrails that determine how these powerful technologies are used responsibly.

It is high time to begin: with a Switzerland that speaks, not only hosts, and with a generation — my generation — that insists on being heard.

So let Switzerland be a part of something. Because Switzerland — and I hope you agree, Mr Berset — has more AI in it than just the licence plate of Appenzell Innerrhoden.

Pia Spolenak, 6c

If you stopped me on the street and asked me what nationality I am, I would answer that I am Swiss. In fact, I hold three European passports. And yet I do not call myself European. Why is that?

We are all citizens of different European countries. We are proud of our languages, cultures, traditions and histories. And we should be, because these are not obstacles to a European identity. They are a fundamental part of it. Too often, however, Europe is something we cooperate with, not something we identify with. Yet when we face war, economic uncertainty or questions of security, no European country can succeed alone. I believe that our strength lies in our ability to act together, to make compromises and sometimes to put shared interests above national preferences. In Switzerland, we are currently debating neutrality. But prioritizing neutrality harms European cohesion, because it isolates us from other European countries.

Across Europe, we are also witnessing growing nationalism and political division. This raises the question: are we too opportunistic to focus on what unites us?

Churchill understood that Europe's future depended on nations standing together. Eighty years later, that challenge remains. I believe that what Europe needs is more than institutions and treaties. It needs a shared sense of belonging. For me, European cohesion does not mean being the same — it means working together towards a common goal. And we can create European cohesion not by forming one culture, but — and I think Mr Berset would agree — by focusing on what we all have in common: our commitment to democracy, human rights, freedom and the rule of law.

As you may have noticed, I haven't told you which other passports I hold. That is because it is secondary. Being European is what matters most for building strong cohesion. One day, hopefully, when someone asks me where I am from, I will still say "I'm Swiss", but first I will proudly say: I am European.

Rafael Bengtsson, 6b

Ladies and gentlemen,
Let me take you back to the evening of the 7th of March 2024. That evening, the news broke that Sweden had officially joined NATO. For me, a European with Swedish roots whose family mostly still lives there, this was a moment of huge relief, and an extraordinary one. For decades, NATO membership had remained a divisive and unsettled debate in Stockholm. But after Putin's tanks crossed into Ukraine, Sweden's entire political landscape shifted within weeks. That moment left me with a lasting belief: when Europe faces real danger, its nations stop counting their differences and start counting on each other. I think Churchill said it best: "If Europe is to be saved from infinite misery, and indeed from final doom, there must be this act of faith in the European family."

And I believe that the Swiss aren't fully aware of the importance of that lesson. Yes, neutrality is deeply rooted in our history and national identity. But the same was true of Sweden. Two whole centuries of non-alignment — until Sweden itself faced real danger. Sweden's history looked much like ours — until it didn't. So what makes us so confident that ours won't do the same? That is why I hope that my generation, and those listening here tonight, will strive towards a Switzerland that collaborates more closely with its European partners.

And, by doing so, makes Europe stronger, safer, sounder and bolder.

Elin Skaanes, 6e

European unity is not only about security and defence — it also depends on our economic and social strength. The post-war era was marked by an extraordinary economic boom — driven in part by the baby boomers, the large generation whose work helped create prosperity and growth. Maintaining peace is easier when people are doing well economically.

Yet we also know Stefan Zweig's warning about the years before the Second World War: nothing embittered the Germans so much as the inflation. Unfortunately, the parallels to the period Zweig described are striking today. The baby boomers are retiring, creating enormous costs for the younger population. Since the boom, the birth rate has more than halved. That's the complete opposite of a baby boom! Without economic growth, people feel left behind, and a turn towards political extremes becomes more likely, which deepens the divisions within society. We, the younger generation, now inherit all of these problems.

Churchill said that Europe needed an "act of oblivion". I wish every party and every politician would "forget" their old slogans, stop the electioneering and instead remember the question that really matters: how can we create an economically strong Europe that confronts the challenges of demographic change and polarisation?

Churchill hoped for the rebirth of Europe; we must now ensure that our continent also flourishes economically, creating a Europe that is attractive to young people. After "Let Europe arise!", it must now be "Let Europe prosper!"

Inès Rothfahl, 6a

About five years ago, I had just spent a summer in Greece. You have to picture me as a nerdy kid who liked to memorize the names of Swiss politicians. Back then, all of a sudden, the wildfires were everywhere — in the media, but also in the air I was breathing. That was when I felt real fear for the first time, and I just couldn't understand why nothing was being done about the climate crisis. To be honest, I still don't understand it today.

It all started with questions about the climate crisis, and that list of questions grew longer by the day. And so here I am now: a white, privileged person who profits from this system, and who has been granted an additional privilege — the opportunity to deliver this statement.

It feels wrong to make a statement under the slogan "Let Europe arise!" And it also feels wrong not to call Churchill out as a staunch imperialist. Every day, people die while fleeing their homes. Racism is increasingly normalized. The rights of queer people are being restricted, for example in Italy under Meloni. The AfD won the election in Saxony-Anhalt. In Switzerland, we are debating a "10-million Switzerland". And the forests are still burning!

Before we go around proclaiming "human rights", we should pay attention to what is happening around us — not just within Europe, but also beyond its borders — and to the ways in which we are complicit in these injustices every single day. So if we have to use the verb "arise", then please, let's not do so in such a Eurocentric way.

Maximilian Roth, 6c

Looking beyond Europe isn't a theoretical choice for me — it's how I grew up. I was born in Israel and raised in Switzerland: two places that could not be more different. Switzerland gives me the quiet comfort of safety, while in Israel, part of my family lives under the constant threat of war. Because of that contrast, world politics is not just news to me; it is personal.

When I look at the Middle East today, I see how dangerous politics becomes when leadership in Israel and the United States focuses on short-term goals, political survival and unpredictable retaliation instead of real peace. These choices do not solve conflicts — they only fuel them. And these wars do not rage far away. They directly affect Europe's security, society and future. Yet too often, Europe and countries like Switzerland take the easy path: hiding in comfortable shelters, staying passive and leaving critical decisions to powers across the ocean. When Winston Churchill stood here in Zurich in 1946 and said "Let Europe arise!", he did not call for passive safety. He called for courage.

To truly arise today, Europe must take an active role in international conflicts. But taking an active role does not mean waging war. It means having the courage to lead through diplomacy, defend international law and actively build peace. Europe cannot just sit on the fence while others dictate the future. We do not need bunker security or military escalation. Europe holds real political weight on the world stage, and it is time to use that weight to foster dialogue where others only cause rupture. Because a Europe that stays silent when the world is in turmoil is not a Europe that is truly arising.