

Closing speech by President von der Leyen at the “Choose Europe for Science” event at La Sorbonne

Monsieur le Président, cher Emmanuel,

Honourable Dean,

Esteemed Professors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to be here in the Sorbonne – surrounded by some of the brightest minds in the world. Dear Emmanuel, you once said that before being a university, the Sorbonne was an idea. An idea of scientific excellence, collaboration and – if I may add – of opportunity. And no story encapsulates this better than that of Maria Salomea Skłodowska-Curie, also known as Marie Curie. In her homeland of Poland, then under Russian occupation, women were barred from universities. So, she and her sister joined underground night schools, dreaming of freedom through knowledge. That was at the end of the 19th century. Her journey would eventually bring her to La Sorbonne. Here she was allowed to study and do her research. She ultimately revolutionised medicine and physics. Maria Skłodowska-Curie became the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, the first person to win a Nobel Prize twice, and the only person to win a Nobel Prize in two different fields. And her discoveries and her work on radiation saved millions of lives. I start with this story not just because we are here in the Sorbonne – or even because it shows how scientific excellence can change the course of destiny. But because this is also a story about freedom. Freedom to learn and invent. It is a story about openness. Openness to turn ideas into groundbreaking discoveries. And it is a story about collaboration beyond borders. And this is exactly what Europe and the world need more today. Because I am convinced that science remains the fuel of progress and growth for our societies. Without the ideas and breakthroughs that come from scientific research, progress sooner or later stagnates.

Unfortunately, as your discussions have shown today, the role of science in today's world is questioned. The investment in fundamental, free and open research is questioned. What a gigantic miscalculation. I believe that science holds the key to our future here in Europe. Without it, we simply cannot address today's global challenges – from health to new tech, from climate to oceans. And as I look around the room – and at all the young people here – I know we are far from having run out of new ideas or bright minds. In fact, the truth is we have barely scratched the surface of the knowledge that science can offer us. So more than ever we need to stand up for science. Science that is universal – shared by all humanity – and that is unifying. Because the pursuit of knowledge and the yearning to understand how things work are values that bring us together as people, as it has done today. We can all agree that science has no passport, no gender, no ethnicity or political party. And as such it does play a crucial role in connecting people and creating a shared

future in today's fractured world. We believe that diversity is an asset of humanity and the lifeblood of science. It is one of the most valuable global goods and it must be protected.

That is why I am here today, to say that Europe will always choose science. And Europe will always make the case for the world's scientists to Choose Europe. Scientific endeavour runs deep through European history – from Pythagoras and Aristotle in Ancient Greece to Galileo and Copernicus in the Renaissance period or to Koch or Pasteur in latter centuries. The oldest university in Europe was founded in Bologna, where teaching started as far back as 1088. And Europe was the home of the Scientific Revolution which saw one of the most consequential transformations in human history – thanks to breakthroughs in mathematics, astronomy, biology and much more. That tradition lives on today. Europe already has the second highest scientific output in the world. It is home to over 2 million researchers – one quarter of the world's total. We lead in green tech, health, economics, business and social sciences. We excel in areas of scientific research and technologies that are pivotal to our future – from aerospace to robotics, from automotive to engineering, from biotechnologies to pharmaceuticals, just to name a few.

And we have a huge number of natural advantages that help set us apart. The first is sustained and stable investment from Europe and its Member States. Europe runs the world's largest international research programme, Horizon Europe. It has a firepower of over EUR 93 billion. Over the last 40 years, the European Union has funded 33 Nobel Prize laureates. European support has made possible breakthroughs in genome sequencing and mRNA vaccines. It spurred the development of cutting-edge microchips, and even led to the first image of a black hole. These examples show what we all know – the return on investment in science is unparalleled. We have worldclass research infrastructure. From particle physics to molecular biology, and from space exploration to nuclear fusion. This helps make Europe a leader in fundamental research.

We have a world-leading supercomputing infrastructure, EuroHPC, and we are investing massively in AI, quantum and digital research. Finally, we also have a proud tradition of open and collaborative science. We uphold the principles of open science, open education and data sharing. Our European Research Council is run not by politicians, but by scientists, for scientists. Our Horizon Europe programme is a magnet for global cooperation. From the UK to Switzerland, from Canada to South Korea, more and more countries want to join it. We see scientists from across the world collaborating here in Europe. Take CERN as a case in point. Founded 70 years ago to carry out cutting-edge research that no individual nation could do alone, it is today the world-leading laboratory for high-energy particle physics and related technologies. Researchers from over 100 nationalities working together for the good of humanity. This is how science should work, and it is why scientific freedom and collaboration must always be at the heart of our institutions and our infrastructure.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Europe has everything that is needed for science to thrive: we have the stable and sustained investment; we have the infrastructure; we have the commitment to open and collaborative science, we have a social market economy that delivers access to good schools, education and healthcare for all. But at the same time, we have to be alert and work on our deficiencies. We know that researchers still face too much – or too complex –

bureaucracy here in Europe compared to some other parts of the world. We know that the path from fundamental research to business and to market is not straightforward or fast enough here in Europe. We know that we need to offer the very best a longer-term perspective. We are ready to tackle this head on.

We want Europe to continue to be at the forefront of fundamental research. We want Europe to be a leader in priority technologies from AI to quantum, from space, semiconductors and microelectronics to digital health, genomics and biotechnology. We want scientists, researchers, academics and highly skilled workers to choose Europe. And this is why today I am presenting the first elements of our Choose Europe Initiative.

The first priority is to ensure that science in Europe remains open and free. This is our calling card. We must do everything we can to uphold it – now more than ever before. We want to strengthen the free movement of knowledge and data across Europe – just as we do for goods, talents and capital across our Single Market. And we want to enshrine freedom of scientific research into law in a new European Research Area Act. Because as threats rise across the world, Europe will not compromise on its principles. Europe must remain the home of academic and scientific freedom.

The second element of Choose Europe is financing. Science is an investment – and we need to offer the right incentives. This is why I can announce that we will put forward a new EUR 500 million package for 2025-2027 to make Europe a magnet for researchers. This will help support the best and the brightest researchers and scientists from Europe and around the world. We aim to create a new seven-year 'super grant' under the ERC to help offer a longer-term perspective to the very best. Through the ERC, we are already supporting researchers who relocate to Europe with a top-up beyond their grant. We are now doubling the amount they can receive this year. And I want to extend this support for 2026 and 2027.

At the same time, we must also focus on the next generation. This is why we are also increasing support to early career scientists through our Choose Europe pilot under Maria Skłodowska-Curie. Those that choose Europe will benefit from higher allowances and longer contracts. We will expand this support over the next two years, with targeted incentives in frontier fields, like AI. For the mid- and long-term: together with our Member States, we want to reach the 3% of GDP target for investment in research and development by 2030. And we will put forward ambitious proposals on research and innovation funding in the next long-term budget. Because we know that an investment in science is an investment into our future.

The third part of Choose Europe is the need to fast-track the pathway – from breakthrough science to transformative innovation and business opportunities. This is why we will put forward a first ever European Innovation Act and a Startup and Scaleup Strategy, to remove regulatory and other barriers, and to facilitate access to venture capital for innovative European startups and scaleups.

Last but not least: We have to make it easier and more attractive to come to Europe for research. We will better link up researchers with research institutions. We will speed up the process around entering and staying in Europe. We already have an excellent platform that links researchers worldwide with thousands of jobs in Europe, as well as providing

visa support and career guidance. We now want to support public and private institutions to better link up to highly skilled workers and researchers, and to speed up and simplify the entry for top researchers. Because bringing the best from across the world is about bringing out the best of Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Europe has made its choice. We are choosing to start a new age of invention and ingenuity. We are choosing to put research and innovation, science and technology, at the heart of our economy. We are choosing to be the continent where universities are pillars of our societies and our way of life. We are choosing to be the continent where innovation serves humanity, where global talent is welcomed. Because as the history of the Sorbonne and our excellent universities show, progress thrives on freedom, openness and collaboration. So, to every researcher, at home or abroad, to every young girl and boy who dreams of a life in science, as Maria Skłodowska-Curie once did, our message is clear: Choose Science. Choose Europe.