



President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen accepts the Empress Theophano Prize on behalf of the Erasmus Programme

*The award ceremony concluded
with great success inside the iconic landmark of the Rotunda*

The inaugural award ceremony of the **Empress Theophano** European Prize was conducted with great success on Wednesday, October 7, inside the emblematic monument of the Rotunda, in Thessaloniki, Greece. The grand ceremony was conducted under the auspices of her Excellency the President of Hellenic Republic Ms **Katerina Sakellariopoulou** and in the presence of Greek Prime Minister, Mr **Kyriakos Mitsotakis**. The President of the European Commission, Ms **Ursula von der Leyen**, participated via remote video connection. The prize accepted, on her behalf, the European Commission Vice-President for Promoting the European Way of Life, Mr **Margaritis Schinas**.

Using historical references, Mr **Kyriakos Mitsotakis** underscored the symbolism of the figure of Empress Theophano, the city of Thessaloniki and the Rotunda monument for this new initiative and prize, explaining how *“More than a millennium later, Empress Theophano makes the reverse journey, returning to one of the most prosperous cities of the Eastern Empire to lend her name to a prize dedicated to the historical links between European peoples – and, importantly, to their shared future.”* Moreover, in reference to the choice of the ERASMUS programme as the recipient of the inaugural prize, he stressed: *“Through this experience, ERASMUS participants have recognised that our individual historical and regional differences are tiles on a mosaic rather than cracks in the larger image of the geographical and cultural unity of Europe.”*

The President of the Governing Committee of the Theophano Foundation, Mr **Stavros Andreadis**, expressed his enthusiasm for the establishment of the new prize and highlighted Thessaloniki’s uninterrupted urban continuity, its multicultural character, troubled history, as well as its vibrant contemporary facet, drawing parallels between the history of the city and that of Europe: *“The history of Thessaloniki is, we believe, the history of Europe, and the perseverance of Thessaloniki is the perseverance of Europe to overcome all of this, to move forward.”* On the goals of the prize, Mr Andreadis said, *“The Empress Theophano Prize aims at strengthening this same feeling, the strong conviction that those things which unite us are more numerous and more important than our individual differences continues to resonate stronger, especially among young people.”*

Meanwhile, drawing links between the old and the new, the President of the Advisory Committee, Mr **Herman Count Van Rompuy**, emphasised the strong symbolism of choosing the Erasmus programme as to receive the first-ever prize: *“The laureate is not an individual man or woman. It’s about men and women who entered their Erasmus years as inhabitants of Europe and left as European citizens. Studying or teaching abroad is not a purely intellectual experience but an existential one. It shapes someone, or rather it transforms someone. It is perhaps the European Commission’s most successful programme”,* and continued to discuss Europe’s next challenges and the importance of European cooperation and integration, of the European Idea.

On her part, Ms **Ursula von der Leyen** expressed her honour at receiving this award as President of the European Commission and on behalf of the 10 million Europeans who have participated in the Erasmus programme since its launch: *“The Erasmus programme worked as a perfect bridge between the young generations all across Europe. Millions of youngsters discovered what they had in common with other nationalities, and what made them unique. For the first time, they felt that they belonged to one big community that spread beyond their country's national borders.”* Concluding, she touched upon the Erasmus programme’s future prospects, as well as the dynamic of the new NextGenerationEU programme, which looks to become the Union’s next big project to shape its future.

On behalf of Eurobank, the event’s sponsor, **Chief Executive Officer, Mr Fokion Karavias**, stated *“Our common European identity is all important where East and West meet. Eurobank, as a Greek banking Group with a significant regional footprint, supports this major initiative which highlights values we share, values which guide us in our relations with the communities we serve in all countries where we are present.”*

The award ceremony opened with a video presentation of the Rotunda monument, including its history and its role for the city as well as the global cultural heritage map. The event was embellished with the musical work **Rotunda’s Music** for voice and strings by composer **Dimitris Maramis**, specifically created for the event, which draws from the unique shape of Rotunda’s dome and the way it echoes. During the music performance, with the help of contemporary technology and **projection mapping** techniques, three of the monument’s large niches hosted projections of the Rotunda’s unique mosaics, in an audio-visual experience that aimed to reflect humans’ journey from nature and spirituality to society and to our common ground of civilisation.

The **Empress Theophano Prize** is set to be presented annually by the **Theophano Foundation** in the form of a distinction not linked to a monetary award, following the evaluation of candidates by the two main bodies of the Foundation: **the Advisory Council and the Governing Council**.

**Throughout the event, all required protection measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 were observed.*

The award ceremony was conducted with the kind support of:



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