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Inauguration of the Academic Year 2005-2006

COLLEGE OF EUROPE

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Rector Demaret,
President Dehaene,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends,

It is a great privilege to give the opening address of this new academic year, which has Beethoven as its patron.

Cherishing the European heritage by selecting a famous European as patron for each academic year is an excellent idea. It reminds us that we do not lack great Europeans - in politics, the arts and the sciences.

Ludwig van Beethoven is a particularly good choice. He was one of Europe's greatest. Born in Bonn with a Dutch name, he composed in Vienna and had a number of his works paid for by subscription from London.

Like few others, he stubbornly dedicated his work to the principles of freedom, justice and community.

"Fidelio" is an openly political opera. Remember that moving scene in which prisoners, political prisoners, emerge from their cells saying: 'what joy to breathe free air'.

It is said that Beethoven originally dedicated his third symphony, "Eroica", to Napoleon, in recognition of his role in the French Revolution.

Yet when Napoleon crowned himself emperor, thus going against the liberating spirit of the Revolution, Beethoven angrily crossed out his dedication.

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was played on Tienanmen Square in defiance of the tanks that came rolling in. It was also played after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Together with Schiller's 'Ode to Freedom', this symphony has captured the sense of community and brotherhood that is central to the European spirit.

Your invitation allows me to speak, in this magnificent hall, about what is close to my heart: "Europe". And because this is the opening of the academic year, I also want to talk about the importance of research and learning and the role of a new generation.

We all know that education is not just about acquiring knowledge and skills. Knowledge starts with a curiosity for the wider world.

But one also needs a critical disposition, plus self-reflection and empathy. Internalise these and you approach the essence of what it means to be a scholar and a European.

Being with you this morning I can hardly conceal my pride at the thought that it was Salvador de Madariaga who took the initiative in 1948 to establish this College.

Here in Bruges, and at your campus in Natolin, we find a microcosm of what Europe is about: living together, learning from each other, building a common future.

The College of Europe has groomed successive generations of European leaders. From European institutions to government; from business to journalism, Bruges alumni rank among the most qualified decision-makers. In ten, twenty years' time, you too will have risen to positions of responsibility.

But your task will be harder than it was for those who went before you. The pace of political, economic and technological change is accelerating. How the European project will evolve is more uncertain - and more contested.

The memories of World War 2 no longer suffice to give impetus and legitimacy to European integration. Thus, you will have to chart a new course for Europe in a more demanding global context.

European uncertainties

I am struck by the extent of self-doubt haunting Europe. In the eyes of many, the European Union seems lacklustre, rudderless.

There has been a rise in national assertiveness from political leaders and more scepticism from citizens.

Different concerns manifest themselves in different countries and constituencies. Some argue that the European Union has a 'liberal bias' with free markets producing excessive precariousness and inequalities. Others fear a loss of national identity.

Many stress that they do not recognise themselves in the Union, saying it is directed at the wrong priorities. Many fear a loss of control over their destiny.

I find the current mood surprising. For we have rarely been more successful. This is not Brussels boasting, but based on facts:

More Europeans than ever before live in peace, prosperity and freedom. From a historical perspective, this is not Europe's normal condition. We now have a regional order based on law, equality and solidarity. And we are admired for it by the rest of world.

Those who take the long view, such as the Chinese, have said that the EU is one of those exciting political innovations taking place only once every 400 or 500 years.

We have to acknowledge that daily life may not always be easy for many Europeans. Unemployment, even poverty, remain stubbornly high.

But nowhere else do people enjoy a higher standard of living. The poor in Europe are probably better protected than the poor elsewhere in the world. It is an important test for any society how the fortunate treat the vulnerable and the disadvantaged.

Everyone wants to join this club and virtually no one wants to get out. Countries are willing to overhaul their entire system of governance and administration just to enter our Union.

Our power of attraction and transformation is enormous. We do system change, not regime change. We do it slowly, in partnership and without military force. Once they enter the EU's orbit, countries are changed forever.

Enlargement has been a historic success for all - newcomers and old member states alike. This is Europe as it should be: principled, a project of hope, original in its methodology and with astonishing results.

The new member-states are among the most dynamic economically and the most enthusiastic politically.

But we should be honest and acknowledge that enlargement does have a cost. The main cost is that we have to adjust.

Adjust to a more diverse Union where interests and perspectives sometimes diverge. Adjust to a situation where there can be less sense of cohesion and common purpose.

Back to Europe's essence

Against this background it is worth re-stating our case. First, why Europe?

Because our "beautiful, murderous continent", as Amos Oz, who won this year's prestigious Goethe Prize, described it, does have a particular identity.

True, discussions on European identity often degenerate into platitudes and guff. Europe's identity is hard to pin down. And of course we share many values with others, notably in North America.

Even so, I believe there is a European identity. And there are, by now, enough elements of a European model. Both on how we organise our societies and how we interact with the wider world.

My firm view is that it is worth articulating this identity and defending this European model.

I have been struck by what George Steiner has written on this subject. He has talked about the elements that, taken together, define Europe's essence.

Our tendency to chronicle the past. For instance by naming our streets after scientists, philosophers, statesmen and writers, not numbers and letters.

Our cities on a human scale, with a lay-out set for the pedestrian. The importance of cafés for our political culture.

Then there is what Steiner calls the double heritage of Athens and Jerusalem. Our fascination with logic, music, mathematics and speculative thought. The importance of the three monotheistic religions. Europe is the continent where both the Book and the Law are revered.

Last, Steiner mentions our weary pessimism, our sense that civilisation may end.

I am more inclined to optimism than Steiner. But I agree that there is a foundation upon which we have built our European house.

A common heritage. A shared outlook. That is the basis for a Europe defined both for what it is and for what it does.

The fact that Europe is now so prosperous and so free, is no accident – even though many take it for granted. The European Union has been central to this development.

We should never forget that it was only after the worst excesses of the 20th century that our exhausted continent was ready to try a new idea.

Not just reconciliation through co-operation, but institutionalised integration and the pooling of sovereignty.

Monnet was of course right when he said that "nothing happens without men, but nothing lasts without institutions". But in turn, institutions must change and adapt.

And it is also true that some of Europe's most exciting projects and successes - Airbus, GSM, Galileo, the European Defence Agency, even the euro - transcend conventional institutional processes.

The Union we have today may no longer be what the founding fathers had in mind. It is different and better.

We have a larger and more political Union, focused on new projects. This is appropriate because the world has changed in ways that was impossible to foresee 50 years ago.

Its essence is still a peace project. By bringing in new countries, we continue the path of reuniting Europe, enlarging the zone of peace and co-operation.

But enlargement cannot be our only project. People expect more than an open market and a regional stabilisation project.

Deeper integration in some areas, will remain of the essence. To respond to new challenges.

Because problems that no one can tackle alone, call for a European response.

But also because our transformative power will wane if our internal cohesion declines.

Europe's journey should continue - but change is needed

The watchwords of our European journey have been simple: deepening, widening and reform. Each element depended on the others for success - and still does today.

I believe we should continue our journey. But change is needed. We have many great things to do. But we must regain trust and popular support.

In particular, we must show relevance and added value by retooling Europe for the challenges of today and tomorrow, not those of fifty years ago.

There is a partial mismatch between what Europe does and what people want it to do.

If, like me, you want 'more Europe' in some areas, to respond to changed circumstances and expectations, we should accept the logical consequence namely that there should be less EU involvement in other areas.

What made sense 50 years ago need not always make sense today. As John Maynard Keynes once said: "If the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do Sir?".

Several areas where the rationale for greater European-level action stand out in my view: the environment, research, internal security.

Most of all, this is true for Europe's international role. This is what our citizens demand. Just look at polls. It is also what I hear from students all the time and world leaders.

And it is logical too. In a world of diffuse threats and where new powers such as China, India and others are emerging, what is each of us able to achieve by acting alone?

Historically speaking, foreign and security policy is a late arrival on the European agenda. Yet we have made massive progress in a short space of time.

This is especially true for an organisation geared to writing legislation, not executive action in a fast-changing world.

In the past five years, we have grown politically and operationally. The time that EU foreign policy could be dismissed as all talk and no action is long gone.

We are present and recognised as major political actors in a way we were not before - in the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa and South-East Asia.

We have no fewer than 9 peace support operations on three continents: from Bosnia to Aceh, from the Congo to Gaza.

In the Security Strategy we have articulated a doctrine of what the EU stands for in international affairs.

We have also built up a crisis management capability, consisting of both civilian and military elements. This comprehensive approach fits well with the new strategic environment.

And we also have structures and procedures to take and implement decisions in real time.

If you analyse EU foreign policy on a day-by-day basis, the difficulties to get everyone to agree and the slowness of our procedures stand out. But if you analyse it on a year-by-year basis, the conclusion is clear: we are, collectively, clearly getting better.

Now is not the time to give in to self-doubt and restrain our own development. Quite the opposite: we must be more ambitious and step up our engagement.

The problems we all face, and the speed at which this world is changing, leave us no other option. We Europeans agree that we need a multilateral, rules-based international system.

But there is more to it. By achieving results in foreign policy we can also show people that the EU is relevant and influential as a force for good in world affairs. Call it legitimacy through action.

If Europeans want to count on the strategic issues of tomorrow – and every day we say we do – then we need to match our ambitions with resources. Those available at the moment - financial and human - will not do.

And we need to accept that there is no future in playing national cards in a world of global insecurity.

We need a Europe that works

If that is the ambition, we need to accept the consequences. We need to equip Europe with the people, resources and structures to perform the tasks that we want it to do.

Regarding the Constitution, I won't get into speculation as to why French and Dutch voters voted the way they did. That is not my role. I obviously regret the outcome and the impasse it has created.

What I can and want to do, is underline my conviction that the reasons why we drafted a Constitution are still valid today, especially in the area of external action.

The need for coherence between the different instruments we have; the need for faster and more efficient decision-making; the need for more sensible external representation - these requirements are all still there.

Some of our existing arrangements - the rotating Presidency, the troika and so on - have outlived their usefulness in the area of foreign relations, as recognised in the Constitution.

There is a compelling case for Europe to really speak with one voice so that our interlocutors get a clear view of what Europe wants.

We have to do better. We need to be flexible and creative. We need arrangements that work; and decisions taken in real time.

You cannot run foreign policy by endless deliberations in working groups or by devoting most of our time to procedural questions over who does what, and who pays for what.

Ever since the Nice Treaty, the European debate has focused on revising it. Years have passed in the expectation that we would soon reach institutional 'cruise speed'.

How many more years of this debate can we afford? In my view it is frivolous to act as if we had oceans of time to reflect on how we organise ourselves to become engaged in the world.

Europe needs the ideas contained in the Constitution for a more streamlined and effective Union. It also needs the rules, set out in the Constitution, to enable different groups of countries to agree on deeper integration.

Our journey should continue. We have many new tasks to perform. So let us equip ourselves to do so.

Europe needs the new generation

Dear friends,

Let me end where I began. Europe needs its young. Without you, there is no European future.

I know many young Europeans are looking to the European Union and wonder how it can help to address their concerns: unemployment, higher education, climate change, terrorism.

The answer is that in some areas the Union plays a role. And in those cases we should improve our performance, to show your generation that the EU is relevant and can deliver. In others, it is member-states that are in charge, as it should be.

But just as the EU should work to address your concerns, it is equally true that each generation has to contribute to Europe's further development.

My generation has spent a lot of time and effort building Europe. For your generation, Europe as a single space to live, study and work is a reality.

Not just because of peace and prosperity. But also because of low-cost airlines, passport-free travel, cheaper phone bills and the euro. All outcomes of EU decisions.

For me, Europe is both about the big idea and the practical application. We all know that the ERASMUS programme has been spectacularly successful. Per euro spent it has probably done more for European ideals than many of the other common policies we have.

So let's expand it so that many more students can experience the beauty of Europe at first hand.

I also very much support the new ERASMUS-MUNDUS programme - to send more European students and professors outside the Union, while their counterparts from the Middle East, Africa, Asia and elsewhere come here.

And why not have comparable exchange programmes for other categories of workers? Not everyone will want to go. But for those who do, things should be made a little easier.

These exchange programmes also serve a larger purpose. For the way to deal with today's fractious world, we need to understand other people and other cultures.

Exchange programmes increase knowledge, empathy and communication. And these factors are essential - both to continue our European journey and to build a better world.

Let me conclude. We owe Einstein the insight that time is relative. If you advance more slowly than the landscape, you go backwards. As it happens, the international landscape is changing very quickly.

So we need to act fast. The world is not waiting for us to get our act together.

You, as the next generation of European leaders, have a special responsibility to go out and continue the European journey.

To build a Europe focused on new tasks, but based on the same values.

Thank you very much.