

Opening address of the Prime Minister during the Opening Ceremony of the College of Europe in Bruges (27/10/2021)

Former President of the European Council,
Rector,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor to open - together with you - the new academic year of the College of Europe; a distinguished institution known for its excellent research, outstanding education and - since recently - its well documented lockdown parties.

Allow me to start with a Belgian message that has – I believe – some European relevance.

And the core of my message is: ‘Too often, the European debate is about institutions, where it really should be about people’.

Now, why am I calling this quote-unquote “a Belgian” message? Because Belgium has a lot of experience in this field. We are institutional reform champions. Between 1970 and 2011, Belgium has had six State Reforms. That’s – let’s say – one every 8 years. Every 8 years, we reshuffle our constitutional architecture. These State Reforms deliver good results when they focus on people’s lives and move the country forward as a whole.

However, they do not deliver when dictated by dogma and, as a consequence, efficiency is pushed aside.

To me, that’s an important message from Belgium to Europe: stay away from institutional dogmatism.

The last thing we need is a big ideological clash, the eurofederalists versus the eurosceptics, a trench war between extremes. Institutional reforms that eat energy and bandwidth, focused inward while the wider world moves forward.

This world that provides our generation with plenty of opportunities, but for many people is also a source of insecurity and threats: climate change, the digital revolution, migration, off shoring of jobs. Global issues, directly impacting people’s lives.

We had crisis after crisis after crisis. It tested our belief in progress. The belief that we have our destiny in our own hands. It is Europe's role to restore this belief. To come up with answers to the insecurities.

Protecting people.

Protecting our interests.

Protecting our European values.

Not with a protectionist project, but with an empowering agenda. Reconciling 'openness' to the world with 'security' for people. Not pulling up the draw bridge. But using our openness to shape the world, engaging with others to set the standards and defining the playing field.

Europe was precisely born to seize these opportunities, while managing the threats. Both a peace project and a project of economic opportunities. Especially today, in these uncertain times, we have to bring this balancing act between 'openness' and 'protection' again to the heart of our Union once again.

This is what we aimed for during the COVID crisis. This is what we should aim for in tackling the climate crisis.

But before I discuss COVID and Climate, I want to stake a step back. Back to 2016. Back to Brexit.

- BREXIT -

Weirdly enough, Brexit meant the rebirth of the European spirit - or at least the rebirth of the notion that Europe works best when united. On their way to the exit, the British government wanted to rummage one last time in the bucket of European benefits. All the blessings of Europe - especially our single market - but none of the burden. In sight of the end game, the UK government tried to divide us. They tested our political unity, but we succeeded.

Michel Barnier and the European Commission took into account every sensitivity of every member state and merged it into one, solid European position.

Faced with the prospect of losing what was dearest to us - the internal market as engine of our prosperity - we rode it out together.

At the outset, most observers predicted a domino-effect; more member states leaving. A Mexican army strategy - a Union dispersing in all directions, but what we

saw was the opposite. Europe didn't undergo Brexit, we led it. There was no domino-effect. Two months after the British referendum, support for EU membership grew by 5%.

Four years after Brexit, support for the EU had even risen by more than 10 percent in countries like the Netherlands and the Nordics.

We rediscovered the power of unity.

- COVID -

We saw the same sequence of events with COVID-19. At the outset, Europe was overly cautious. Wait-and-see. We didn't even have a common approach on mouth masks and ventilators.

Four Health ministers – from Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands – coordinated among themselves. Their message was: “health care is a national competency. Vaccines are none of Europe's business.”

Institutionally, you can't argue with that, but looking at the reality on the ground, it didn't make any sense. COVID-19 was a global problem and we needed a European solution. As Commission President Von der Leyen would coin it later: this was “Europe's moment”.

That is how it goes nowadays: with each major crisis erupting on our continent, there is a push from below; a push from the people.

We have seen this push again recently; in energy: the price hikes were driven by the world market, so people looked beyond their governments and urged Europe to act. While politicians look at the institutional framework and see impossibilities, people see the problem and ask: “Who has the solution. Where is Europe to protect me?”

In their eyes, member states can't do it alone anymore. Like it or not: people have raised the bar.

Especially, your generation. You expect more from your governments, irrespective of where that government resides.

That's the good news: people have not given up on Europe.

Even when in the recent past, Europe has often acted “too little, too late”; even if Europe often organized its own delivery gap – for example during the sovereign

debt crisis or the migration crisis, despite all these shortcomings, people have not given up on Europe.

They understand very well what's going on in the world. They unmask fake news and disinformation, even if it's written on a very large, red bus in the center of London.

People perfectly understand that global challenges can never be solved by turning our backs to each other; by locking ourselves up in our national capitals.

They urge us to cooperate. To work together. And during COVID that's what European leaders did. They turned things around: the initial aid package of barely 30 million euro became a 750-billion-euro investment plan; the initial failure on mouth masks and ventilators was transformed into a common European vaccine strategy.

From development over production to shots in the arms: Europe showed itself to be a world leader.

Not even Marine Le Pen or Matteo Salvini dared to argue individual countries would have done a better job.

What we saw during the COVID-19 crisis was once again 'openness' and 'protection' combined: a Europe that remained open for business. We kept trade lanes open. While the United States chose for full protectionism with their Defense Act, Europe exported one billion vaccines, of which 700 million were produced in Belgium

And next to our openness, Europe protected; Europe secured the health of its citizens.

Europe did indeed "whatever it takes" to get out of the health crisis.

And this time we did not outsource the "whatever it takes" to technocrats, like in 2008 with the financial crisis, when we asked the ECB to save the day because the Council couldn't agree on a European Banking Union and European fiscal union. By the way, twelve years down the road, the Eurogroup is still discussing these proposals.

The lesson of the past decade, is that Europe is strong when member states jump over their own shadows;

when we don't lose ourselves in the institutional quagmire but see the common European interest, compromise and act on it. A lesson we must take to heart as we are tackling the climate crisis.

- CLIMATE -

With 'Fit for 55', Europe is showing the way forward. We have a comprehensive strategy: a thorough reform of the Emission Trading Scheme, a focus on renewables and energy efficiency, but also plans for a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism forcing our trading partners to act as well.

But apart from the policies, it will be our mindset that makes the difference. Not to see the climate challenge as something constraining us, but as an opportunity to innovate. It is as much about sustainable living as it is about building a new economy.

We will not reverse climate change with a 'policy of less': less growth, less consumption, less economic activity. Because that would lead inevitably to less investment, less solutions, less prospects.

People want to move forward in life, get more out of life, not less. This is human nature. It's biological.

If Europe wants to beat climate change, it will be with a strategy of "more", "more but different".

With new technologies – like green hydrogen and efficient wind turbines - developed here, in Europe and exported to the rest of the world.

That's the way forward.

Again by reconciling 'openness' with 'protection'. By innovating and at the same time protecting our middle class. Protecting our prosperity – current and future. Since we will leave no one behind in this climate transition. We will make it a gradual one. Citizens should not be taken by surprise; not be placed before a 'fait accompli'.

The best way to protect people is making sure they are part of this change. That sustainable technologies are affordable. Electric cars are not something for the happy few, but for every European. That the energy bill goes down thanks to renewables. That people have the right skills for new, green jobs.

We can do this.

Europe can do this.

With the Recovery and Resilience Fund we have for the first time a real European economic strategy.

All member states choosing a clear common direction, using the scale of our single market and leveraging the innovative strength of European companies, from Stockholm to Sofia.

That will be our message, our European message, next week in Glasgow.

- LIBERAL DEMOCRACY -

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is not only our climate that is under pressure. Our liberal democracy is challenged as well.

What used to be self-evident ten years ago, is no longer today. When I was a teenager, when the iron curtain came down, liberal democracy was something people worldwide aspired for. Admired us for.

Today, the leaders of China and Russia have chosen a different path, the path of autocracy. Even here in Europe, some want to install "illiberal democracy" - as if something like that would exist.

Liberal democracy is not the easiest answer to our current challenges, but it is the right one.

For the simple reason that it means 'all of us deciding together' on where we are headed.

Liberal democracy is not about having "a strong leader". It is about "strong leadership." And it is my deep conviction that strong leadership is based on diversity and inclusion. Liberal democracy is as much about protecting minorities, protecting diversity as it is about the power of the majority. Otherwise you end up with John Stuart Mill's warning: "the tyranny of the majority over the minority."

This tyranny is exactly what's popping up in Europe today: governments attacking the free press,

denigrating Muslims and immigrants, denying fundamental rights to women and LGBTI people.

While our European liberal democracy is the exact opposite. It is about human decency, personal freedom and allowing people of all walks of life to live their lives freely and come together in one society.

It is above all, ladies and gentlemen, about the separation of powers. The *trias politica*. A victory at the ballot box does not mean absolute power. Independent courts enforcing civil liberties are a crucial part of democracy; because it are these courts that need be strong enough to stand up against a tyrannic majority.

That is why the recent attack on the European Court of Justice is completely unacceptable. European governments that are not willing to respect the ground rules of liberal democracy undermine all trust.

Trust between member states, trust between the peoples of Europe. Trust we need if we want a common future.

To those who give incendiary interviews and think it's necessary to declare a new world war in the Financial Times, I want to say: you are playing a dangerous game, you are playing with fire when waging war with your European colleagues for internal political reasons.

It is not about misplaced arrogance of so called 'old' member states. Yes, maybe founding members are sometimes guilty of camping on the moral high ground, but not this time. This is not an issue of West against East, of old against new.

This is about the overwhelming majority of member states – from the Baltics to Portugal - who agree our Union is a union of values, not a cash machine. You cannot pocket all the money but refuse the values.

So, what is the way out of this stalemate?

We should not kick these countries out – as some suggest. We should call them out.

We should not take their bait, but instead listen to the message of the 100.000 Polish citizens who took to the streets carrying the Polish flag and the European flag, side by side, to refute fire brand tactics.

A message President Von der Leyen understood very well. That is why she is considering an infringement procedure and preparing the use of the rule of law

conditionality. We are all awaiting the ruling of the European Court of Justice on the instrument of conditionality.

But make no mistake. The Council should not let the European Court fight this fight on its own. We should avoid past mistakes and not leave it to the Court of Justice to solve this crisis on its own. Just as we left it to the ECB to clean up the sovereign debt crisis on its own.

This is a fundamental political problem that needs to be solved politically, by the Council and by the European Parliament. By setting out and anchoring the ground rules for our Union: the rule of law, democracy and all the fundamental rights – things that have been self-evident for so long but are no longer today. And by making these ground rules enforceable – better than they are today.

If we really want a Europe that delivers – a phrase heard so often - we need to fix this problem.

Anything short of this would mean little more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

– SOVEREIGNTY & STRATEGIC AUTONOMY –

The rule of law discussion is existential, but we should be aware it is also inward-looking. While we are struggling to enforce the ground rules of the Union, the rest of the world is moving forward and the real work is waiting and that is to better protect our European interests.

To construct European sovereignty next to national sovereignty. Because individual member states, even the big ones, are confronted with their limits, with their inability to make an impact while the very definition of sovereignty is precisely “the ability to control your own destiny”.

During the Syrian war and the migration crisis, we saw that national sovereignty didn't cut it. The day more than 1 million refugees showed up at our borders, member states big and small were taken by surprise. That was in 2015.

Today, we see the same issues arising in the AUKUS-conflict and with the withdrawal from Afghanistan. We need to shed off our naivete.

There is no such a thing as a solid foreign policy that is not grounded in defending our own interests.

The interest of Europeans should be the very compass of our foreign policy.

Europe is second to none in soft power: in trade, in economics, diplomacy, in fighting climate change. But in today's world that means very little without being backed by hard power. We are a giant, but a gentle giant.

We need to develop and grow our hard power. China uses it all the time to leverage its economic ambitions. The 'Belt and Road Initiative' is economic and geopolitical at the same time. Russia weaponizes its gas and other resources to grow its sphere of influence. The United States switches between free trade and protectionism depending on what's best for them, not for us.

That's the reason we need to build European defense capabilities, to create that hard power to back our soft power. To be a better partner to NATO but more so to create smart power.

This is what Strategic Autonomy should be about: securing our prosperity through hard capabilities, because more and more industries are becoming geopolitical.

Let me just give you two examples from Belgium: health care and semi-conductors. The goods produced in these industries are so vital for our future wellbeing that our very survival depends on it. For health care that is stating the obvious, but the same goes for semi-conductors.

That might sound abstract to some ears, and far removed from our daily lives, but the opposite is true.

Semi-conductors are used in almost every product on the market: from headphones to computers to cars to heavy machinery that produce all other goods.

Without microchips our economy would collapse but here's the problem: Europe is world class in R&D,

we are the biggest users of semi-conductors in world, but all producers are either American or Asian. That is not just an economic weakness. It's giving our competitors the ultimate power over our destiny. An existential risk we cannot afford. That's what makes this geopolitical.

A case in point why Europe needs strategic autonomy: maintaining our 'openness' but adding the strategic perspective of protecting our interests. Not locking ourselves up in splendid isolation, but making sure others need us as much as we need them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I know we can do this. Because Europe has done it before. Together we have overcome major obstacles and launched even greater projects. The great generations of Schuman and Monet, of Adenauer and De Gasperi, of Mitterrand and Kohl.

Today, it is up to us.

To our generation.

To you.

We too must build Europe.

We will have to do it our own way.

Gone are the days of the smoky backrooms. It will no longer be the visionary leaders that drive Europe forward. It will be visionary European citizens that demand more from European politics, pushing their leaders forward.

That is my definition of an 'ever closer' union.

A Union closer to its people, more capable of empowering, freeing and protecting them.

A Union that gives back the belief in progress to all Europeans.

That progress is possible.

That progress is there for all.

I thank you.