

Mister President,
Honoured Guests,

First of all, let me express my gratitude to the Catholic Flemish Student Union, my old fraternity, and the University of Antwerp, for organizing this lecture, and for inviting me to give a few words of introduction. It is indeed an honour and a privilege.

And of course, my sincerest gratefulness is also directed towards president Klaus himself, for giving us the chance to personally get acquainted with his ideas and views on such diverse matters as climate change, free market policies and the European Union. Controversial ideas, that challenge us to rethink our own positions and intellectual prejudices. I certainly do not agree with president Klaus on a number of topics, but nevertheless I value his opinions highly, as one should in a true democracy.

In a true democracy, we must be able to express our views, no matter what the reigning consensus tells us to think. We must be given the chance to debate the principles we hold dear with our opponents, in order to convince others of the validity of our arguments. And finally, when we have tested the sensibility of our beliefs and have gathered enough popular support to put them into practice, we must be held responsible and accountable for the policies we conduct. That is the founding principle on which our society is based.

This principle is not to be taken for granted. We may never forget that on this continent, merely two decades ago and just over 500 kilometres to the east, civilians were oppressed by an abusive ideological system that curtailed freedom in every aspect of life. Western Europeans tend to disregard the communist occupation of Europe and its effects on the people who were subjugated to it. For us, the Cold War was a gruesome and often depressing but all in all relatively peaceful time.

Eastern Europeans, however, didn't have the privilege to taste the fruits of freedom after World War II. They found themselves locked up behind an Iron Curtain, cut off from the free exchange of goods and information, and rendered powerless in a state of submission. And that, I think, is the crucial difference. For us Western Europeans, the transfer of sovereignty from the nation to a supranational level meant obtaining peace. For Eastern Europeans, it meant becoming oppressed. It is perfectly understandable why so many Eastern Europeans are reluctant to hand over the democratic powers they have just received. Certainly for a man such as Vaclav Klaus, who not only stood alongside his people during the Velvet Revolution, but also during the Velvet Divorce.

If we want to construct a democratic and strong European Union, we may not turn a blind eye to this reality. The particular situation of our continent will cause the political system that we adopt to differ considerably from all other forms of government that have yet been created. A Union can only exist if it respects national and regional identities, if it considers the communities that

create Europe as free and responsible, if it advocates social justice within its borders and beyond and if it recognizes the differences and diversity that should make Europe great.

As the Dutch historian Geert Mak put it in his 'State of the European Union': the popular legitimacy of the European project has reached its limits, and has perhaps even exceeded them. The European citizens have lost their grip on the European project. It is no longer a people's Union, but an elitist Union, propped by a bureaucratic and technocratic lingo that seems senseless gibberish, even to the most politically aware citizen. Meanwhile, between 70 to 80 percent of legislation that is passed in the national parliaments is nothing but the conversion of European Union legislation. European citizens lose interest at a point where the impact of the Union in everyday life keeps increasing. The democratic tension that follows this evolution has become unbearable.

For many years, the Union was carried by positive winds. It was an almost sacred entity that brought us peace and was propelled, not only by a vision, but by a founding narrative for Europe: never again the pointless devastation of war, and democracy and justice for all Europeans. However, over the past ten years the world has changed dramatically and profoundly, and so has Europe. But that European vision and founding narrative didn't change along with it. If there are lessons to be learned from this decade of European limping, it's that we have to stop telling the Europeans what to do and think, and start listening to what they are actually saying.

All over Europe thousands, maybe millions, of ordinary European citizens have come to this conclusion. I'm merely stating the obvious. More importantly is how can we tackle this enormous democratic deficit. Some say that democratic failure is inherent to the European Union, and that it therefore can never be a political Union. These are the Eurosceptics. Rather than patching up the flaws in the system, they propose to abandon the political project, and return to a purely economic union. Others advocate just the opposite. They dismiss the democratic deficiency as a fallacy or as a temporary setback on the path to political integration. They want to take the great leap forward to a United States of Europe, in the assumption that the European citizens will eventually jump after them into the void. They are what I call 'Europhiles'.

I'm neither Eurosceptic nor Europhilic. I consider myself to be a Eurorealist. I firmly believe in the European political project. In fact, I believe that institutionalized political cooperation is inevitable. If we do not stand alongside each other in this ever closer world, each of us separately will become redundant and in a matter of decades Europe will be known throughout the world as the Plains of Oblivion. But I'm also convinced that if we do not strengthen the popular approval and consent which must bear every democratic entity, the European political project is doomed to fail. History has taught us that the abstract creation of utopias in the luxury of one's study can only lead to the nightmare of despotism. It's exactly this fear of an enlightened despotism that causes European citizens to turn their backs to the Union.

The evolution towards a stronger Union is a lengthy process, and should not be taken lightly. What the Union needs now is a debate. Not between government officials and bureaucrats behind the closed doors of remote castles, but an open debate between ordinary citizens, European, national, regional and local politicians, public figures, intellectuals etcetera. It will be a difficult debate, but a necessary one. Ideas and visions will collide and social divisions will appear. But whatever the outcome of the debate may be, it will be rooted in popular consent. And will therefore give the Union the democratic legitimacy it so desperately seeks.