



A Look at Europe's Future in 2020-2030; Political, economical, security and social dimension

Excellencies,

Colleagues from the European and Czech Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am extremely honoured to have been invited to deliver the key note speech at today's important conference on the future of Europe, its' people, resources and technology. Extremely honoured and a bit worried because I don't feel up to the task to sketch that future in all of its' political, economical security and social dimensions. Later in the day, real experts will comment on all of these aspects and outline what, according to them, the future may bring for the European Union and its' Member States, not least among them the Czech Republic.

You see, I am not an expert; I am every inch a politician who has submitted herself time and again for political suffrage at the local, regional, federal and European level in her home country, Belgium. The European one is by far the political level I prefer but I have always tried not to lose touch with my home base, which of course is greatly helped by the fact that I live in Brussels, the EU's capital.

But let me turn to the subject of today, the future of the European Union. This postulates the continuing existence of that Union throughout the next few decades and beyond.

We tend to take the continuing existence of the Union for granted, but whether that will be the case will very much depend on ourselves.

The Union is not a given, it is first and foremost a political creation and as such might unravel, implode and altogether disappear if we allow the momentum to slip.

The founding fathers (and preciously few founding mothers) knew very well why they undertook that mission. After having seen how the peace was lost after World War One, they decided not to make the same mistake after World War Two. This time around, they would prevent one more repeat by first bringing together those industries that had fuelled previous wars (Coal, Steel and Nuclear Energy), and then by gradually developing further economic and political cooperation.

For the first twenty something years of their existence, the European Communities, as they were then called, assembled six countries. Those were the former enemies, France, Germany, Italy and the three Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and the Grand-Duchy of Luxemburg). I won't retrace the ensuing enlargements, from six to nine, then to twelve, then to fifteen, and finally to all of the present twenty seven member states.

The latest and most ambitious enlargement only became possible after the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe freed them from authoritarian communist rule and became modern parliamentary democracies and market economies.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I was born exactly eleven days after D-day which makes me older than the Union herself. I belong to a generation that refrained from travelling to countries under an authoritarian regime, whether on the right hand side or on the left hand side of the political spectrum. Lest you believe me to be a rigidly principled person, I must honestly point to the fact that travelling was much less common and easy in those years than it is today. Crossing the Channel was still quite an adventure in those days and there were no such things as cheap flights and cars were expensive.

Be that as it may, I visited Bucharest, Budapest and Prague for the very first time in late February 1989, and East-Berlin a few weeks later. With a delegation of Belgian Liberals, we undertook that mission to find out whether there were liberals active in these capitals and whether we could be of any help. I vividly remember my emotion to walk the streets of cities I had read a lot about. It really felt as a continent finally reunited. It still feels like that of course, but the novelty has faded. Normalcy has set in, as it must.

The latest expansion of the Union is the political embodiment of that reunification. That expansion has been entirely voluntary and peaceful which makes me offer the opinion that the European Union is the single biggest peaceful political undertaking in human history and on the planet. We should be very proud of it, and yet we aren't. As I said, normalcy has set in, and we take the Union for granted. Worse even, whole segments of our public opinions have turned against the Union and accuse her of all the ills that may beset our societies.

Since the last European Elections, a significant proportion, some fifteen percent, of seats in the European Parliament are filled by Euro sceptic representatives. They seldom contribute

positively to the debates because they aren't interested in any future for the Union. More worrisome is the fact that a number of mostly elderly gentlemen and a few elderly ladies have added their voices to the chorus and try to persuade their audiences that they would be better off without the bureaucratic monster in Brussels as they generally characterize the Union.

That is blatantly untrue. Let's just imagine for a moment that the Union indeed disappears. That would obviously be the end of the monetary union and of the single market. That would also be the end of the largely borderless territory we enjoy today. Borders would go up again, we would again need visa and passports to travel, and each state would be left to its own devices to monitor the migration flows which most probably wouldn't suddenly come to a stop because the Union has crumbled. Our economies would be fragmented and protectionism would soon come back with a vengeance. Each of our countries would again be on its own to face the huge challenges of demography, climate change and security.

Worse still, this part of the world we live in would be more politically fragmented than ever and would find itself much weaker to face the growing competition from China, Brazil, Russia and the United States, not to mention those countries which hold most of the presently known energy reserves.

Does anyone in their right mind really believe that not only say the Czech Republic and Belgium, but even the bigger states like France, Germany and the United Kingdom would be better off if they had to face all of these challenges alone, without the benefits of membership of what is still the strongest bloc in the world?

The European Union is not a given for eternity, it is a political construct which can only survive for as long as the participants continue to nurture it, to support it, to develop it and of course to improve it.

I am a passionate defender of the European Union, as you may have noticed, but that does not mean that I am blind to its defects and imperfections. Many of those originate in the inevitable tense relation between the Union on the one hand and the Member States on the other. While they are complementary, their respective institutions and officials seem to find it difficult to acknowledge that simple fact. Press conferences at the end of each summit are a case in point.

Listening into several of them, one cannot help but wonder whether the Prime Ministers did indeed participate in the same event, and whether all of them indeed played the prominent role they say they did play when addressing their national journalists. Media mightily contribute to this by focusing mainly if not exclusively upon "their" Prime Minister as if the other ones didn't count.

The institutions of the Union on their part are also prone to rhetorical overkill, thereby raising expectations which they themselves cannot fulfill, thus paving the way for disillusion and disenchantment.

The so-called Lisbon process which was intended to turn the Union into the first knowledge society of the world is a case in point, and Europe 2020 might be heading into exactly the same direction.

Make no mistake, I welcome the development and sharing of knowledge and I also advocate the free movement of knowledge and expertise, but I believe that both the Institutions of the Union and the Governments of the Member States should refrain from signing up to commitments they don't seriously intend to keep.

The European Parliament is not immune to the temptation of rhetoric overkill. Its powers have been greatly enhanced by the latest treaty changes. The Lisbon Treaty has effectively turned the Parliament into a fully competent co-legislator, on an almost equal footing with the other branches of European legislative power, that is to say the Commission and the Council. Until now, the European Parliament has generally used these new powers wisely, but there is a tendency to turn co-decision on legislative and budgetary matters into co-decision on implementation and execution and I believe that is a mistake. To give but one example, some of my colleagues insist to be included into negotiations on trade agreements. I believe that is a mistake. Parliament oversees and monitors negotiations, it shouldn't participate in them because how can one judge critically what one has negotiated oneself?

My own parliamentary committee, the Foreign Affairs committee, counts several members who clearly would love to be foreign minister or high representative for foreign and security policy themselves. I might mischievously add that those of us, who have actually served in government, are more discreet in this respect.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have argued strongly for continued unabated support for the European Union in order to keep her in marching order for the next few decades (and beyond) for the challenges are many and daunting.

This afternoon, panels will discuss the trends, opportunities and risks of demographic trends, and the challenges posed by the aging of our populations.

Those challenges are formidable indeed, but there will be ample time to discuss them, so I won't go into that now.

I will rather make a few more comments on the political challenges beyond those I have briefly sketched and which concern the functioning of the Union and its institutions.

How to ensure that the European Union and its member states can continue to play a significant role on the world stage and what should that role be is the last issue I will now comment upon.

I briefly indicated that the Union as a bloc still is the major economic bloc in the world. We need to safeguard that politically, which means that we should let the Commission play the role the Treaty entrusts her with. The Commission negotiates trade agreements on behalf of the Union, and within the negotiating mandate given to her by the Council. For member states to try to undercut the Commission is bound to be counterproductive as trade partners will play member states against one another.

The Union must also complete the reunification of Europe by bringing into its fold the countries that were born after the dislocation of Yugoslavia. This is no easy task as none of these countries are unproblematic. Commissioner Füle has unfolded his plans for this in the European Parliament just this week and he can count on our critical support. As I said, the task is daunting. We would be ill inspired to slow down our efforts, or to let those countries linger in a kind of limbo. They might turn elsewhere for support, or they might disintegrate or new violence might erupt, triggering new waves of migration. None of these is welcome. While we are certainly right in being strict on accession criteria, we should from time to time ask ourselves if we would have gotten into the Union if equally strict criteria had been applied to us, say I who comes from a country that is still without a new government almost six months after our last elections.

And then there is Turkey of course. I myself am in favour of Turkey joining the Union if she fulfills the criteria. The reason for that is quite simply that I would rather have Turkey safely anchored into the Union than tempted to turn eastward towards Russia and the Middle Eastern world, or both. It is of course true that Turkey should do more to solve the Cyprus issue, but so should two of our own member states, Greece and the Republic of Cyprus.

Beyond our own geographical confines, and beyond our own economic interests, the European Union should have the ambition to contribute to world peace and stability. I don't know whether we always need to proclaim that such and such third states are our strategic partners, and whether that always justifies an outpouring of money, but it would require us to gradually develop a coherent view on the world and on its most desirable development.

It will be a while before we get there, but the fact that the European External Action Service will start on the said date, the 1st of December is in any case a good beginning.

You know that this Service will be the diplomatic arm of the Union, and that all former Commission Delegations are becoming Delegations of the Union. Baroness Ashton has worked hard and negotiated smartly with the Member States and the Parliament to get the service

going. She has done a great job and I trust that the Service will gradually develop into an outstanding diplomacy in its own right, not as a competitor of national diplomacies, but as a complement to them.

It will not be easy, because there will be competition, and suspicion. Most of our diplomacies are peopled with brilliant and smart women and men and therefore I trust that the Union will be able to extend its reach so that she will be seen the world over as a beacon of democracy. That is my dearest wish for 2020 and beyond.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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