

Speech on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Maastricht Treaty

Speeches Internal Policies and EU Institutions Maastricht 09-12-2016



Dear President Juncker,
Dear honorable Mr van Rompuy,
Dear King's Commissioner Theo Bovens,
Ms Annemarie Penn-te Strake (Mayor of
Maastricht)
Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Coming to Maastricht is always a very special pleasure to me. I was born only some 40km from here, and those of you in the audience who come from this region, will know that it has a very special feeling to it. I use to say that someone coming from here, where the borders of the Netherlands, of Belgium and Germany meet and those countries flow almost seamlessly into each other, must almost definitely develop a sort of European identity, or at least a very personal understanding of what Europe is about.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today we celebrate not only the 62nd birthday of young Jean-Claude Juncker but also the 25th anniversary of the even younger Maastricht Summit that paved the way for the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The Maastricht Treaty like no other Treaty stands for the creation of the European Union. Not only because it gave our Union its name, but most importantly because it set out to establish a genuine European Union by and for its citizens:

It gave birth to the European citizenship, and hence to the equality of all citizens in our Union regardless of their nationality.

It strengthened the European Parliament as co-legislator.

It introduced the famous Maastricht criteria for macroeconomic stability.

And finally a plan was adopted to give Europeans a common currency. No more queuing at exchange offices, no more heavy pockets with coins in foreign currency, finally a safeguard against international currency crises and devaluations. The Euro was first and foremost a policy for the citizens – to facilitate their lives and commercial interactions, and to protect them from financial and currency crises.

Those are the milestones of the Treaty of Maastricht and they stand as key legacies of this city to our European continent.

But to really grasp the almost incredible value and importance of this Treaty, we have to look back to the historical context in which it was concluded. Because for me personally, it concluded the second of two major shifts that I had the chance to witness throughout my life.

The first shift took place many years earlier and is connected to the person of Willy Brandt. When I was 17 years old, in 1972, I campaigned for this man – on the streets plastering my city's walls with his posters. It was his fundamental belief in democracy that had impressed me already as a young man and that today is still a guiding light for my daily work. Brandt believed that

democracy was the strongest force in the world. Therefore his message was “change through rapprochement”, what we call in German *“Wandel durch Annäherung”*. He said that once the virus of democracy is spread it can never be stopped. This belief was at the heart of his rapprochement with the East. Because he believed that once people get a taste of freedom, they will never forget it and soon they will start to demand it. And they will not stop to demand until they get it.

Only three years later the so-called Helsinki process culminated in the Helsinki Accords, where for the first time also Eastern European dictatorships had to accept a charter describing the fundamental rights of their citizens.

And only five years later *Solidarnosc* started, which certainly was the beginning of the end of communism in Poland. At the latest by 1989 Brandt had been proven right. When *Solidarnosc* finally won the first free election with an overwhelming majority, when Vaclav Havel was elected president in Czechoslovakia, when Hungarian Foreign minister Gyula Horn cut the fence at the Austrian border and allowed tens of thousands of Eastern German refugees to flee to the West and when finally the Berlin Wall came down the power of democracy became visible.

The time around the year 1989 was a second European renaissance.

And when neighbours, friends and families were reunited, when whole countries threw away their chains of authoritarian regimes and felt the energy of liberation, then even the last sceptic saw what Brandt had meant.

This was the second big shift I experienced in my life - as a young major here in this very region and later as a young Member of the European Parliament. A big shift because it changed the political landscape in Europe completely.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

It was in this turbulent context that the leaders of twelve sovereign nations met in 1991, here in this building where we are today, the MECC congress centre. At a time when the old bipolar world order was crumbling down and a new stability was sought.

And even though the wind of change was also blowing through Western Europe, the climate was rather one of scepticism and mistrust. Not even half a century after the horrors of the Second World War, the reunification of Germany meant again an economic powerhouse at the centre of Europe, a country with a population of 80 million, and it meant the merger of the armies of Eastern and Western Germany.

We owe it to the strength and courage of leaders such as Helmut Kohl, Francois Mitterand and Jacques Delors that this scepticism was overcome. That it was overcome because these wise men had a vision and a conviction. They understood that the idea that had led to the Schuman declaration and the creation of the European Economic Communities still held true: that the guarantee of peace on our continent is only provided by close cooperation between the European nations.

Helmut Kohl was able to convince the other eleven Members of the EEC that this was precisely Germany's goal. He stood by what Willy Brand had coined as the German post-war leitmotif twenty years earlier at his Nobel peace prize acceptance speech. I cite:

„Ein guter Deutscher kann kein Nationalist sein. Ein guter Deutscher weiß, daß er sich einer europäischen Bestimmung nicht versagen kann. Durch Europa kehrt Deutschland heim zu sich selbst und den aufbauenden Kräften seiner Geschichte. Unser Europa, aus der Erfahrung von Leiden und Scheitern geboren, ist der bindende Auftrag der Vernunft.“

“A good German cannot be a nationalist. A good German knows that he cannot refuse a European calling. Through Europe, Germany returns to itself and to the constructive forces of its history. Our Europe, born of the experience of suffering and failure, is the imperative mission of reason.”

The Maastricht Treaty was the manifestation of this call, and the push for the introduction of the Euro and to abandon the strong deutschmark was maybe the strongest expression of the will to have a European Germany, rather than a German Europe.

And today being in Maastricht, we should not forget the contribution of the Netherlands and its Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, under whom the Dutch presidency came to full power and proved – once more – that the Netherlands, this founding nation of the European Union can be a true leader in Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have spoken about two shifts that I have witnessed throughout my life. In the turbulent times we live in today I am afraid of having to witness a third one.

Look at what is going on in the European states around you, and also here in the Netherlands:

journalists are laid off for doing their job too well, even though history tells us that an attack of the freedom of the press is no less than an attack on democracy;
homes of asylum seekers are smeared or even attacked. The value of protecting the weakest in our societies is disrespected;
walls and fences are built and solidarity is denied;
the political climate is as poisoned as I have never experienced it before;
in some Member States the rule of law is bent beyond its breaking point;
in June the first Member State has decided to leave the European Union after a campaign that was characterised by lies and polarisation;
and those who stir up hatred and ridicule our fundamental values have serious chances of winning elections.

Those are dramatic trends we all observe. They challenge our very fundamental values - democracy, exchange, pluralism, the rule of law, freedom and respect for human dignity. These values are the glue of our European societies, the glue that has kept us together over more than half a century already and that is the guarantee for peace on our continent and within our societies.

If we let go of these values, if we don't live them and if we don't fight for them, then we risk losing everything. We put in danger the process of European integration that has brought us peace, prosperity and protection.

I don't want to witness this as a third shift in my life, and I am sure none of you here in the audience today neither. Therefore, let us fight for our values. Europe is calling on all of us to stand up for our values, to fight for them, each and every day.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There are many reasons why the populists and demagogues are rising in Europe. It is too easy to say that this is all due to some post-truth spirit and that voters are not rational anymore.

Because despite the fact that the EU is a success story, real and deep problems exist, and maybe we have ignored them for too long.

There are the growing social and economic divides between young and old, rich and poor, city and countryside;

There is a decreasing belief in democratic representatives;

And we have a real problem in finding effective solutions to the big challenges of our time: managing asylum and migration, bringing unemployment - especially youth unemployment - down, fighting tax fraud and tax evasion and bringing back growth in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

These are real problems, and it is legitimate that our citizens demand that we find answers to them. And in times of globalisation, of an ever-more connected world these answers have to be European.

To be able to provide these European answers, we need to show to the citizens that Europe is not part of the problem but part of the solution. In the European institutions, we work hard to prove this every day - and I am sure that Mr Juncker will confirm this.

But we need, more than ever, the active and positive engagement of the Member States. Therefore, at this event that is called "Europe calling", allow me to make three calls to our capitals:

First call: the Brussels blame game has to stop. Europe regularly produces success stories, but we have a true problem of messaging when national leaders sell every success as national and all failure as European. Brussels bashing may be popular in the short-run, but I am convinced that no-one sustainably wins elections by always complaining and never providing solutions. The gain of Brussels-bashing might be immediate, but the damages are long-lasting.

Second call: recognise that the EU is democratic. Over and over, we hear the debate that national parliaments have to be involved more in European decision-making. But let me tell you: this is already the case. The European Parliament is in constant exchange with national parliaments. And since Lisbon, we even have a warning mechanism for national parliaments when they feel excluded - the yellow card. Do you know how many times the yellow card has been used over seven years? Three times. And the even stronger orange card? Zero times. If you want to increase democratic accountability in Europe, then focus on the Council, where most of the meetings held are behind closed doors and where most of our legislation is blocked.

Third call: provide the EU with the tools it needs to deliver results to its citizens. What we have today is a Union of semi-finished projects. We have a monetary union, but not a fiscal union, a union of financial discipline, but not of financial stimulus, of labour market liberalisation, but not of social protection. All too often the call for a complete Union is presented as federalist pipe dream, but this is simply wrong. A complete Union is about delivering results that make the lives of our citizens better. Nothing more, nothing less.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We do not lack plans and ideas in Europe, we lack courageous leaders who dare to defend them, who implement our plans and who build the Europe of the citizens in the spirit of the Maastricht Treaty that still says in its very first article:

"This Treaty marks a new stage in the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken as openly as possible and as closely as possible to the citizen."

Let us remember this message today here in Maastricht. In this microcosm that represents Europe like no other city. Where being fluent in Dutch, Limburgs, German and English is no

curiosity. A place where local identity flourishes, national identity is very present, and a place that in the Dutch spirit is at the same time very open to the world and sees diversity as an enrichment and not as a threat.

We need to rediscover the spirit of Maastricht.

A lot remains to be fought for to complete the mission we gave ourselves with this Treaty 25 years ago. Today, let us be proud of what has already been achieved.

Thank you very much for your attention,
Hartelijk dank voor uw aandacht.

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