

Mr Herman VAN ROMPUY
President of the Administrative Council of the College of
Europe

Opening Ceremony, Bruges Campus
13 November 2019

Dear President of the European Council,

Dear Rector,

Mijnheer de Gouverneur,

Mijnheer de Burgemeester,

Your Excellencies,

Dear Professors and Students,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for the College of Europe to have the President of the European Council here at the opening session of the 70th academic year in Bruges. The College is much older than Poland's accession to the European Union. That was not possible at the time because Poland was not yet a free country. It is 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a still improbable event, even at a time when wonder and admiration never last long. It was the beginning of the reunification of Germany and of Europe as a whole. It should not be forgotten that without Solidarność and the Polish Pope, this liberation and reunification would not have taken place.

It should not be forgotten that 80 years ago Nazi Germany invaded Poland. The second war began with Poland. Churchill

once said: for Poland's sake, we entered a war. It was about Dantzig, Gdansk, a city that Donald Tusk knows so well. The tragic history of Poland in the 20th century is closely linked to that of Europe. It was therefore a powerful symbol when a Polish Prime Minister was awarded the highest office in the Union. However, being a symbol is not enough to prevent crises, as the President of the European Council unfortunately has to do. In a crisis, it is not a question of where you come from but of what you do.

A President of the European Council must keep the club of nations together, because all decisions are taken unanimously. It is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for success. After all, results must be achieved. In the course of your term of office, there were three main questions. Will Greece remain in the euro zone and will membership of the monetary union be irreversible or not? Will the refugee crisis be overcome and will the Union be able to protect its borders? Will the UK leave the Union in order or chaos and will it be the only one to choose the exit? The answer to all these questions has been positive. Only the 'Europe of results' counts in the end. History does not remember words, just results. Donald Tusk and his European Council demonstrated the Union's resilience against the prophets of doom. Yes, the multiple crisis was overcome. But the Union has also proved successful in other areas. Fourteen million jobs have been created over the last five years. At the historic climate conference in Paris in 2015, the Union spoke with one voice on the most important issue of the times to come. A matter of 'life or death'. In the useless trade war, the Union remained the only credible defender of free and fair trade through the agreements that we concluded with Japan, with the Mercosur countries (Argentina and Brazil in particular). We did so while a tariff war broke out. The European caravan moved on. The Union kept its signature in the Iran nuclear deal. It showed that she is in no way a vassal of the US. The President is in the process of achieving results in the negotiations with China that will prove that no trade war is necessary to correct distortions. Our attitude is twofold:

firmness and dialogue. Strong on the principles but always open to dialogue. The British know what this means.

Donald Tusk is a historian. He knows that history is the teacher of life. History never repeats itself, at least not in the same way. There are no laws in history. WE are history. People do not allow themselves to be grasped by laws. But I personally never believe that the British withdrawal is once and for all. One day, a young generation will correct that folly not only because it is economically disadvantageous, but because a country alone cannot defend its ideals and interests in the new world in which we already live. Isolation is no longer splendid. The transatlantic link will be restored because the values of the West are stronger than one president.

Over the next few years, the Union will continue to move towards greater autonomy when it comes to European champions in new technologies, greater autonomy when it comes to energy supply, to its own borders and to its own security. We are far too dependent on others in the world today. We will continue to work on social and societal cohesion within each of our increasingly divided societies and on cohesion between countries. We need to make our citizens feel more protected from real or perceived threats such as unemployment and unstable jobs, mass irregular migration, climate change, terrorism, corruption and fraud, climate change, terrorism, military danger and others. At global level, we must be the standard-bearers of multilateralism. It will be about 'order or chaos'. How can we better protect people without falling into protectionism? That's the question.

We can no longer seek the advice of Hannah Arendt, the patron of this promotion. She would warn us against rising totalitarianism and authoritarianism all over the globe. She would encourage the EU to remain the fatherland of democratic values.

Autonomy, cohesion, protection, unity and freedom are the key words for the Union in the coming years.

Donald Tusk will not disappear from European politics. He will help to give substance to these and other concepts. Thank you for what you did and will do for our great European ideal.

There will always be a difference in style between you and me. The main distinction is that I am a haiku poet and you are not. That distinction will remain.

I keep believing the Union can handle all the challenges I just mentioned. It will be with ups and downs. We will get up and fall. Too often we act 'too little and too late'.

There are many reasons to be skeptical, insecure or anxious. But pessimism is a form of intellectual laziness. A pessimist is always right. Either his prophecy turns out badly and he says: happily so! Or he the pessimist is right and his reaction is: I told you so! Better to remain a man or woman of hope.

I give the floor to the mayor of this beautiful and unique city of Bruges, Dirk Defauw,