



College of Europe  
Collège d'Europe



**Speech by  
Rector Federica MOGHERINI**

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MARIO SOARES PROMOTION

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Chers étudiants,

C'est avec un sentiment d'émotion profonde que je m'adresse à vous ce soir, pour la cérémonie d'ouverture de l'année académique de la Promotion Mario Soares. C'est votre Promotion, votre chance de vivre une expérience unique et inoubliable, qui va vous accompagner pour le reste de votre vie. Et c'est ma première Promotion, qui va aussi rester pour toujours dans mon cœur.

Mais il y a une autre raison pour laquelle nous partageons ici dans cette salle magnifique un sentiment d'émotion, et c'est lié à la présence du Président du Portugal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, qui nous fait l'honneur d'être ici avec nous, dans un moment si difficile pour tous nos pays, l'Europe et le monde entier - et je veux le remercier énormément pour ça, au nom du Collège et de vous tous. Merci, Monsieur le Président.

Before I give the floor to the President for his keynote speech, let me introduce our Patron de Promotion, Mario Soares.

The man, the politician, the fighter, the winner.

The hero of Portuguese democracy and freedom, that has spent all his energy and talent, from his very early years in University, to put an end to dictatorship, but also to prevent the radicalization of the Revolution, and then to bring his country into the European integration process.

Ready to pay the price of unconventional, revolutionary choices – with prison, deportation, exile. Ready to restart the fight every time, even when the difficulties appeared immense. Always guided by his values, that for him – historian, lawyer – were the constant and creative update of the fundamental principles of humanism: freedom, equality, justice, pluralism, human rights, peace and international cooperation.

He has been Secretary General of the Portuguese Socialist Party, and leader of the Socialist International, with strong political and personal ties with leaders like François Mitterand, Olof Palme, Willy Brandt, just to mention a few. He has been Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prime Minister, President. He has been the engine of the three Ds policy of his country: Democratization, Decolonisation, Development. He signed the request of accession to the (at the time) European Economic Community in 1977, and then concluded himself the negotiations, signing the accession treaty in 1985.

He understood that bringing Portugal into the European integration process was the best way to guarantee that democracy and freedom were irreversible achievements for his country and his people.

And at the same time, he never stopped fighting for democracy and freedom also in Europe. For him, being a convinced European and being critical towards the shortcomings of the European integration project were not contradicting elements, on the contrary: being a proud European implied for him the constant search for a better Europe.

Member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2004, president of the European Movement International, he has always believed in – and worked for - a Europe of values and solidarity.

An idealist constantly aspiring to a better future, for his country, Europe, and the world. And yet a realist, extremely aware of the conditions needed to put in place the changes he was dreaming of.

To use Gramsci's words (that for sure he would have used) he had "the pessimism of reason, and the optimism of the will" – or rather, I would say, the lucidity of reason, and the determination of the will.

His wife writes that in 1975, when the revolution that put an end to dictatorship was turning into a radicalization that was very far away from the dreams of democracy and freedom that had animated Soares – and with him many others -, during those months she used to tell him every morning that the situation was not the one they

had been fighting for all their lives, that she was really desperate. He replied: "No. We are still fighting. And we are winning".

And indeed, they won. Because they never gave up. With lucidity, determination and hope.

There is an anecdote that helps understanding the personality of Mario Soares more than a thousand words. And we have tonight the privilege of listening to this short story in the words of a great Portuguese, a great European, a citizen of the world, that knew Mario Soares well, and that has accepted immediately our invitation to share with us his memories of him.

It is pleasure for me to introduce to you the message that Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations and former Prime Minister of Portugal, has addressed to the Opening Ceremony of the Mario Soares Promotion of the College of Europe.

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"Looking back, Portugal's integration into European institutions may seem inevitable. At the time, it was not".

Please take a moment to focus on this sentence, and what it means. Imagine the economists cautiously advising against early accession of Portugal into the European Community, and Mario Soares closing the meeting by telling them that Portugal would have joined – and the sooner, the better.

Guterres always told me that there is a difference between “being in power”, and “having the power”. I am sure he had this in mind. If you are in a position to take decisions, use it. Don't waste it. Do what you think is right.

Sometimes, what you believe is the right thing to do, seems impossible to achieve. Sometimes it seems unreal. Weird. Unlikely to happen. Unpopular. Against the mood of your times.

Sometimes everybody around you warn that you are going to fail, you are putting all your energies into a dream, a lost case. They advise to aim at something easier, more realistic, more possible.

But change doesn't happen, without someone that makes it happen. And that might be you.

Because even the impossible, can turn real. As Nelson Mandela said, “it always seems impossible, until it's done”.

To make it happen, you need the courage and the lucidity that Mario Soares had. The capacity to do not what is easier to achieve, but what you believe is right. Democracy for your country. Human rights for all. The unity of Europe. Overcoming colonialism. These are only some of the fights that Mario Soares choose to win.

I have no doubt that many, around him, had warned him about the price to pay - a very high price - and the risk of failure. “Why should you go there? Why should you risk to lose? You will hit the wall” they must have told him. And he did, indeed, hit the wall for some time. Hard times.

But he must have thought that the real failure would have been, for him, giving up to what he believed was right. His principles, his values.

And he made it. He won. And with him Portugal won, and Europe won.

I wish you the strength and courage to follow what your heart and mind tell you is right. Don't ever make a step back because of fear to fail. Or you will have failed already. There are fights that are worth fighting - no matter what the mood of the time is, no matter how little chances you have to make it. There are some imperative choices you have to allow yourself the luxury to make. This is what determines who you are.

Some generations live evident determining choices, and Mario Soares clearly belonged to one of those generations, called to make history. But every generation has its own chance to be on the right side of history. Yours, as well. Don't ever forget it.

Do what is right, not what is easier.

And you might one day say, as Soares does in one of the last interviews he gave "j'ai eu alors le sentiment profond de pouvoir accomplir ce qui devait être fait".

Before I conclude, let me share with you a short personal anecdote.

The very first choice I was called to make, as soon as I was appointed Rector, last spring, was choosing the photo that would have accompanied this Promotion.

After long talks, the College team and our Portuguese friends came up with two options - both very telling of the personality of Mario Soares. The first one, was him

giving a public speech, with a lot of energy and even anger - Mario Soares, the fighter.

The second one, is the one you see behind me. Mario Soares, the winner. Smiling, confident, a very soft image. It's Mario Soares, the man. The smiling man.

His daughter Isabel said of him: "He loves people. He gives everyone his personal telephone number, he talks to everybody. He is a very curious man and he enjoys hearing funny stories. He is also a good story teller himself. He is an ordinary man, a simple man. He loves beauty, and style. He has a strong feeling for colour. He knows that he has no time for that, but sometimes he becomes sentimental about it. Just for a brief moment, and then it's over".

This photo captures that moment. The man, the ordinary, sentimental, smiling man.

I wanted you to be accompanied, this year – this difficult year - by an image of happiness and gratitude. To remind you that even in the most difficult of times, you can smile. And that a smile is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. Only if you are strong you can afford it – and show the human being beyond the public figure.

In a time when everybody seems to identify toughness with strength, that photo is there to remind you that real strength doesn't need toughness. Real strength is based on understanding, and empathy. It takes much more courage to smile, sometimes, than to shout louder. You can be strong, and soft. You can be strong, and smile.

May the strength and the smile of Mario Soares accompany you during these ten exciting, challenging, extraordinary months at the College of Europe, in Bruges and in Natolin. And from here, from the moment when you enter this unique community of the College of Europe, may your life be full of happiness, empathy and success in accomplishing what you believe is right.

Thank you.