



College of Europe
Collège d'Europe



Natolin

OPENING CEREMONY

Tuesday, 8 November 2016, 11:00h

Mister President of the European Commission, Jean-Claud Juncker;

Mister Minister and President of the Administrative Council, Íñigo Méndez de Vigo;

Dear Mayor of the City of Bruges;

Honorable Rector; your Excellencies;

Dear Professors; dear fellow students:

Before we begin, we would like to tell you, President Juncker, that we are delighted with your presence here today. On behalf of the College of Europe students, we thank you for your speech and for your inspiring message.

Indeed, the European project is needed more than ever, but some of its citizens do not understand its true worth. Therefore, the EU needs reforms in order to address pressing issues: the communication of its value, security, terrorism, and the defense of our common values and principles.

These are precisely the kind of conversations that we, as students, are having on a daily basis. We wonder where are we going; what is the future of the European Union? But... what is the European Union?

Well... That was also one of the most searched questions in Google after the results of the referendum in the United Kingdom last June! However, this question carries deep significance and should have been addressed beforehand. Even to us students the answer may not be entirely clear, and in fact not everyone can dig into the highly complex issues that their country, or we all Europeans, are facing nowadays.

The combination of personal resentment, the feeling of being left behind and not heard, opposition to globalization... is leading to the rise of populism, of Euro-skepticism throughout Europe. People who were often indifferent in the past are now turning to those parties that openly express this frustration and that blame current political elites both at home and in Brussels.

But the EU is no longer an elite project known only by a few, or only here in Europe. In fact, other actors seem to view our project from a very different perspective. In China, for example, the translation of their characters for the EU roughly corresponds to something like "European United Union". One could think it is redundant to emphasize the unity part twice, but maybe this is precisely what we need more in our Union. As Abraham Lincoln said, "a house divided against itself cannot stand".

Another soon-to-be ex-President, Mr. Barack Obama, stated recently that "the EU remains one of the greatest political and economic achievements in modern times" and he reminded us that "no EU country has raised arms against another". He went on saying that "families in other parts of the world risk their lives to give their children the blessings and quality of life that we enjoy, which should never be taken for granted".

Have we Europeans already forgotten what the EU has done for us? A few days ago, during this visit to the College, Javier Solana suggested that maybe "the United States of today understand the EU better than the United Kingdom does". It is yet to be seen whether this is the case after the US elections results. Ignorance is not an excuse. Maybe the EU should be further promoted as a subject in all schools, for as much as stimulating progress, education can establish unity. Mr. President, we should find ways to bring citizens closer to Europe, as their support is essential to maintain and develop our Union.

De toute façon, c'est assez évident que les valeurs et les principes européens ne sont pas partagés par tous. Les attaques à Paris, suivies de celles ici en Belgique, sont le plus clair exemple de cette triste réalité.

Comme beaucoup d'autres étudiants parmi nous, ces événements survenus il y a presque un an jour pour jour, restent ancrés dans notre mémoire. Je me souviens, lorsque j'étais à Strasbourg, de l'annonce faite que le marché de Noël serait annulé pour des raisons de sécurité. Bien sûr, il n'est pas possible de sécuriser complètement des événements qui réunissent des centaines de milliers de personnes dans les rues, à moins de restreindre nos libertés. Mais, devons nous pour cela nous priver de nos libertés, de notre culture et de nos traditions? La liberté implique des risques, mais ça en vaut la peine !

Dans ces circonstances, céder à la peur nous semble la pire réponse, car c'est exactement le but des terroristes. Nous devrions, au contraire, continuer à jouir de nos places publiques et de nos libertés pour montrer qu'on ne se laisse pas intimider par de tels actes. Nous devrions faire tout ce qui est en notre pouvoir pour combattre la terreur tout en préservant notre façon de vivre de manière libre et démocratique.

Ultimately, the attacks were not only targeting French or Belgian citizens. They struck the heart of a fellow European nation and foremost our core values. In response to these events, Europe must stay strong, Europe must stay united. Diplomacy and dialogue should remain the tools to be used when fighting against the challenges posed by today's threats. One can say that we are facing two main challenges: to the EU itself and to everything the EU stands for.

In the past, integration and economic advance went hand in hand, and that has changed now. We are no longer integrating only our benefits, but we find ourselves with a need to solve our common problems, including migration, security and terrorist threats. These are the issues that today touch upon the daily lives of our citizens. The Union is faced with greater demands and even greater expectations.

Instead of just taking them for granted, we must remind ourselves of the many advantages of unity and cooperation in Europe. When we talk about the benefits, peace is usually mentioned first; we have been able to overcome centuries of animosity between our countries, and this is a historic achievement. It cannot be sufficiently emphasized. Less than two months ago, the Rector took us the Bruges students on a visit to Ypres to witness the horrors of the First World War, a necessary reflection in the beginning of our journey as students and a fundamental basis of the College's own existence.

Certainly, among many other things, the European project has brought us a singular and revolutionary system, a structure for peaceful conflict resolution. However, it is not enough to remember, or to be reminded by others, of our strengths. What Europe needs is a renewed comprehension, a renewed understanding, a renewed feeling for our deep and lasting interdependence. The awareness of this has faded over the past years. Some fear that Brussels has continued to extend its powers, detailing what Member States or their citizens may or may not do.

When people say that the EU regulates the quality, shape, thickness and curvature of bananas... then that is a bit too much. And many of our citizens don't understand why they are supposedly being told what bananas to eat, but at the same time, they are unsure about whether the EU is able to sign the trade agreement they have been hearing about for months. We must resolve this paradox; the EU should not be focusing on small details but on bigger issues, the issues that the Member States cannot resolve by themselves.

Let's make this Union one we can all be proud of. In your words, President Juncker, "a Europe that moves forward, not backwards". Let me now speak as a woman who shares this vision. More and more women are clearing the obstacles that stand in their way and this is cause for celebration and optimism. Here the EU stands to make a difference, not only in ensuring that women are equally represented, but also that they are respected. We should seek to build a society in which there are no roles than those chosen, or those earned. This is a question of humanism, rather than feminism.

Through reforms, we can put the EU back on the road to success, we can make sure it doesn't go into history as no more than a great experiment. And even if perceived as complex or as dysfunctional at times, the institutions in Brussels ensure contact, discussion, compromise and progress, as we Europeans see each other, talk to each other on a daily, equal basis. With some many States, each having different interests and ways of doing things, how can we expect this to be easy? We have to accept this challenge, to build rather than to deconstruct, to improve rather than to abandon, standing united in the face of adversity.

Mr. President, fellow students, there is no doubt that the EU is facing many challenges. Nor is there any doubt that Europe is needed now more than ever. It is still necessary to be reminded of the achievements of the past, while at the same time educating our citizens of the value of the EU. But if we want to succeed, we need reforms.

We, the students of the College of Europe, have a particular interest in these issues: our external security, terrorism or migration. Over the coming year and also after the College, we will be ready to play our part in bringing on the needed changes.

Thank you, Mr. President, for addressing us today and we wish you a most fruitful year in leading Europe towards prosperity and success.

Thank you all very much for your attention!