



College of Europe  
Collège d'Europe

Brugge



Natolin

## Opening Ceremony – Speech by student representatives Fabio Vidal and Cecilia Nieuwenhout

Monsieur le Ministre Stubb, Monsieur le Ministre et Président du Conseil d'Administration Inigo Mendez de Vigo, vos excellences, Monsieur le Bourgmestre, Monsieur le Recteur, Mesdames et Messieurs, chers collègues,

Avant de commencer, nous voudrions vous remercier chaleureusement, monsieur le Ministre, pour nous avoir honoré de votre présence et votre discours. Paljon Kiitoksia puheestanne.

Au nom des étudiants, permettez nous de prendre la parole pour formuler certaines des valeurs qui tiennent à cœur à la promotion Chopin.

Il est temps de parler de courage!

Courage de qui? Quel courage? Tout d'abord notre courage, le courage d'ouvrir nos esprits lors de cette année académique, le courage de la réflexion critique et de l'expression de nos pensées. Le courage de se demander: c'est quoi, en fait, l'Europe?

Ensuite, courage signifie oser prendre des décisions. Cela veut aussi dire: mettre en oeuvre ces décisions et les défendre quand c'est nécessaire. Winston Churchill, l'un des fondateurs du Collège d'Europe, a exposé son propre point de vue sur ce sujet:

*"Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts."*  
Ses mots sont assez pertinents aujourd'hui.

We sometimes look to our leaders to show courage. There are many current situations in which courage is needed; courage to stand up for our values, courage to take decisions that are not always popular. Courage to do what one feels it is right. Sometimes it is hard to see what is right. Or what the consequences of a decision will be. But the price of inaction is also high and dangerous.

Political courage is what is at stake these days in unstable yet challenging times. Half a year ago, Russia sent troops to Crimea. A referendum was held on the unilateral separation from Ukraine. This referendum was deemed to be illegal by the international community, but this hasn't stopped Russia from following its expansion. Territorial integrity and the respect for democracy are the fundamental values of the European Project we have been building since 1945. We should have the courage to stand up for these values today!

Also within the European Union, difficult and wise decisions have to be made. The Greek crisis is putting our faith in the European Union to the test. In such times, we should keep in mind that we were the ones who created the Eurozone, so we need to have the courage to make it complete and to make it fair. We must stand up for the consequences of these decisions.

What do we want our future to be like? What is the European Union we want? In such moments, we should go back to the basis of the European thought. Therefore we believe in solidarity. In the courage of standing up for solidarity.

Ladies and gentlemen, an estimated amount of 500.000 refugees have arrived in Europe so far this year. They are here after a long journey, fleeing the war, hoping to find humanity when there is no more hope back home. They find themselves trapped, in front of closed borders, or in long queues. For weeks, they have been camping in improvised and inhumane conditions, facing the despair of uncoordinated actions by EU countries.

In this situation, we want our leaders to have courage. The courage to stand up for the values of solidarity and human rights, on which the Union itself was built. We want our leaders to honour our Nobel Prize for Peace; to respect the 1951 Refugee Convention; to set up a fair asylum policy. We should have the courage to welcome these people on the basis of solidarity and humanism, and to learn from them. We can learn from their different points of view and their different cultures. We should see this as an opportunity.

More than ever we face fear within our borders. Some current events might even send shivers down our spines. However, fear should not lead us in decision making. Instead, courage, and vision on the future, should guide us.

Yet, we should not only look to our leaders to show courage.  
Not only the leaders have the power to make the difference. We can make the difference.

The real Europe is not the European Parliament, is not the European Commission, not even the Council. Europe is more than 500 million individuals, living from Aveiro, in Portugal, to Sofia in Bulgaria; from Sweden to Malta. And these people need to have courage too, in their day to day life. Courage to not give up, courage to find a job, or make their own job, to open doors to the neighbour when needed. Courage to keep believing in the European Project.

Nothing in life is only good – there is a negative part to everything. But it's only if there is darkness from time to time, that you can see the bright side. Let's have the courage to accept that we are not always right in our judgments. Let's embrace diversity. Let's make every single citizen proud of this European Union, proud of what we are!

Dear colleagues, what are we? What is Europe? I'd like to say that Europe is like a tree! It doesn't grow straight all the time. Not all branches reach up. But still, the tree grows. And it takes time to grow! It is needed courage to take decisions – decisions are not always perfect, like branches are not always straight, but still they make the tree stronger. Even the bad decisions are part of Europe, they have somehow brought us to where we are. They help to support the good ones! The world, is watching us.