

## Opening speech Sassoli Promotion

by Rector Federica Mogherini

Cara Alessandra, Giulio, Livia,  
Amici e compagni di lavoro di David,  
Dear Mayor, Governor, guests,  
Participants to the European Diplomatic Academy,  
Colleagues of the College of Europe Administration,  
Faculty,  
Dear students of the Sassoli Promotion,  
E cara Roberta,

Thank you. Thank you first of all for being here.

Thank you for joining our College community, as we officially inaugurate our Academic Year 2022/2023, in what is probably one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult year for our continent. It is a bit scary, as I am afraid I said the same last year and the year before that that would have probably been the most difficult year for Europe, and yet we could not imagine that —after all the crises Europe has gone through, from the eurozone crisis, the financial crisis, the terrorist attacks on European soil, the effect of climate change on our continent, the pandemic— we have to also face war in our century, our millennium, on European soil. This highlights even more the importance of the European Union and what your contribution to the European is and will be.

Thank you also for joining our College community, as we dedicate our academic year to David.

In January this year, immediately after he left us – far too soon - we received hundreds of messages asking to nominate David Sassoli as the Patron de Promotion of the College of Europe for the Academic Year 2022/ 23. Students, alumni, faculty and staff, of all nationalities and backgrounds – by the way, he would have loved this participatory way of choosing our Patron — they all wanted, they all asked to honor and thank the man, the European, the President of the European Parliament. And rightly so.

David was for so many of us a friend. But also, and always, a guiding light, a compass of lucidity, integrity, wisdom and humanity. A brave, honest, gentle European, proud and humble, able to listen and to connect with each and every person he found on his way. His smile, his open, welcoming smile, was much more than just a smile: it was his identity card, and somehow a political statement. This smile —that you will see for the rest of your promotion, and for the rest of your life, I hope— was saying that no matter how harsh the words could have been (and he was able of very harsh words when needed), no matter how

profound the disagreements could have been – still, he was and stayed open. He was listening. He was trying to understand, and making his best to be understood, with humility, respect, but also with the strength of his beliefs and values.

This smile was telling anyone he met, that he was welcoming the person, the human being – before and beyond diversities and divergencies. His eyes, his mind, and his heart were always open to others. All others, without any distinction.

“David was a friend”, I said. And this is how I feel. But I know that there are hundreds, probably thousands of persons in this room and out there – in Italy, in Europe, across the world – that feel exactly the same. That they have lost a friend. Because he was. Friend of many, very diverse, individuals. This was his gift, his talent, his strength.

This doesn't mean that everybody liked him— not at all. Nor that he liked everybody. There was no naiveté in him, and for sure he would have never softened his positions to please someone. Having been a journalist – an excellent one —he knew how to choose his words in the most powerful manner. He was always clear, unequivocal, easy to understand. If he thought that something was wrong, he was just saying it. And then doing all he could to change it. There was no compromise possible with him on values, on democracy, human rights and rule of law; on equality and social justice; on peace, international cooperation and respect of the rules-based international order. These were the foundations of his identity, and of his being European.

Not everybody liked this – inside and outside of the European Union. But even those who didn't share his ideas and his actions, still respected and admired him. And still do. I cannot think of anyone else having received so unanimous and uncontroversial recognition, across the political spectrum, across institutions, and most importantly for him, across society at large. And he wouldn't have considered this as an element of individual personal pride. He would have considered this unanimous recognition as a sign that still, in the polarized world of today, there is some space for coming together. For respect.

Coming together, finding or building common ground, unity in diversity – without any hypocrisy but with real commitment – was for him the essence of our European Union. Notre raison d'être. Et je ne peux pas trouver des meilleurs mots que les siens, pour dire pourquoi il est notre Patron de Promotion, au Collège d'Europe, pour l'année académique 2022-23. Permettez-moi de citer presque en totalité un article qu'il avait écrit pour la Revue de l'Union européenne juste quelques semaines avant de nous quitter. Le titre est « Nos valeurs ne sont pas négociables ».

*« A peine soixante-seize ans se sont écoulés depuis la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, et 32 ans depuis la chute du mur de Berlin : des périodes synonymes de destruction, de pauvreté et de souffrance pour tous les peuples européens. La mémoire de l'histoire est un*

*fardeau, et malgré les belles formules du genre « plus jamais ça », c'est avec incrédulité que nous assistons en Europe à la résurgence des vieux démons de l'antisémitisme, de la xénophobie, du racisme et du rejet de la différence, porté par des nouvelles vagues de nationalisme. Si l'Europe dans laquelle nous vivons aujourd'hui se porte mieux, nous le devons à ses conquêtes et à la détermination de millions de citoyens qui croient au projet de nos pères fondateurs.*

*Il est de notre devoir morale et de notre responsabilité éthique de protéger tous ceux qui se battent au jour le jour pour la justice, qui exigent la transparence de la part des institutions, qui sont en première ligne pour assurer la libre information de tous les citoyens, qui luttent contre les régimes oppressifs qui restreignent nos libertés. C'est pour ces raisons que nous devons nous efforcer de défendre sans relâche notre demeure bâtie sur le pluralisme, la diversité et l'inclusion. C'est pour ces raisons que l'Union européenne s'engage activement à défendre la démocratie et les droits de l'homme, y compris dans ses relations extérieures et à ses frontières.*

*La démocratie, la liberté et l'Etat de droit ne sont pas négociables. Les valeurs sur lesquelles repose l'Union européenne ne sont pas négociables. En ces temps difficiles, certains pays, malheureusement aussi au sein même de notre Union, ont cru pouvoir remettre en cause les fondements démocratiques sur lesquels nos Etats ont bâti ce projet de paix, de coopération et d'amitié entre les peuples, l'Europe. L'Union européenne est une entité dotée de règles communes, que nous avons tous acceptées volontairement à la faveur de l'expérience que nous avons acquise de la démocratie.*

*Malheureusement, il ne faut pas aller bien loin pour se faire une idée concrète de ce que pourrait être notre Europe sans l'Etat de droit. Il suffit de penser aux lauréats du prix Sakharov de ces dernières années : Svetlana Tikhanovskaia, leader de l'opposition démocratique en Biélorussie, se bat pour que le régime de Loukachenko ne viole plus les droits des citoyens, ne réduise pas la société civile au silence, et n'utilise plus la répression comme moyen de contrôle au quotidien. (...)*

*Alexei Navalny (...) a mené des vastes campagnes politiques contre la corruption du régime de Poutine (...) ce qui lui a valu d'être empoisonné et emprisonné. (...)*

*Comme eux, bien d'autres dans le monde se battent pour les droits de chacun. Nous ne les oublions pas. L'Union européenne est fondée sur les valeurs de la démocratie et des droits de l'homme. Lorsque les droits de l'homme sont remis en cause, lorsque la démocratie est en danger et que les fondements de l'Etat de droit sont ébranlés, nous avons besoin des plus courageux d'entre nous : défenseurs des droits de l'homme, syndicalistes, journalistes, blogueurs et professionnels des médias, artistes et éditeurs, tous ceux qui osent donner une voix à ceux qui n'en ont pas.*

*Or l'autoritarisme gagne du terrain même à l'intérieur de nos frontières.*

*Au sein de notre grande famille nous nous efforçons constamment de respecter les cultures, les mentalités, les histoires et les structures sociales de chaque pays membre, mais nous ne pouvons en aucun cas céder sur certains principes et valeurs. Les pressions sur le système judiciaire, la pénalisation de l'avortement ou de l'homosexualité, les obstacles à*

*l'information, la création des zones sans lesbiennes, gays, bisexuels et transsexuels ou la propagande discriminatoire ne sont pas des valeurs que l'Europe partage. » - End of quote.*

As you see, David was open, smiling, gentle and kind, but this doesn't mean he was compromising on what he believed was the essence of our democratic life.

Also in this, he is a guiding light for all of us, in these awful times: he knew that the most authentic – and in the long run effective – manner to counter a certain vision of societal and international relations, based on conflict and aggression, the best way to be assertive in today's conflictual world, is not by accepting that paradigm and trying to compete on the ground of power politics, but on the contrary it's clarity of vision and consistency with our values and principles. For him, this was Europe's strength: democracy and being consistent in our values.

Let me use again his own words – and now I quote from a speech he gave one year before leaving us, in January 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, when he joined our College community –unfortunately online, because of the restrictions during the lockdown– at the opening of our Conference that we organized here in Bruges on the Future of Europe (virtually). On that occasion, in a long and fascinating exchange that he had with our students and faculty (and I would invite you all to go have a look at that— I did, and it was a great experience), he said:

*“Putin says democratic systems are outdated. No. I do not agree. Democracy can still preserve and build our freedom. If you have a paradigm that keeps together fundamental rights such as defence of freedom and dignity of individuals, this is a paradigm that is not often found around the world. Europe can be the reference for others, so we have a huge responsibility. Perhaps we are not proud enough, and this is one of our shortcomings. So many would like to be like us. We don't want to impose anything on anyone. But we want to be able to be proud of how far we've come in 70 years. Our countries have found peace. And perhaps today this might allow Europe to become a true instrument for peace in the world. Without wanting to impose anything on anyone, never. But so many admire the European construction, that has been so difficult, so slow, but so important. We can be a beacon, an example, a point of reference for the rest of the world. And this could be for us the engine we need to go on, to raise the level of our pride in the EU project – we need more Europe.” (End of quote).*

Yes, he was proud of our Union. Never complacent, always vigilant on our own contradictions and shortcomings, and aware of the responsibility of institutions.

“Democracy is fragile and needs to be taken care of” – he said in that same speech here at the College, and he continued – “Everyone is talking of whether autocracy or democracy is more effective. If we let go of our values, we'll have abdicated our identity, and right now our European identity is particularly important, because crises need to be faced with full transparency. This is why democracy needs to be efficient.” End of quote.

He was gentle, not naive. Open to others, but also extremely solid in his convictions. He was proud of our Union, and at the same time always aware of its limits, of the work needed to renew our democratic system, and stay true to our ideals.

He was a man of the institutions, and of the people. This is why his institution was the European Parliament.

Roberta, our choice to have David as our Patron de Promotion is first and foremost a tribute to the institution he was serving, as you are serving today. When he opened the premises of the European Parliament to the people in need, during the pandemic, he was doing the most natural thing for him: literally putting the institutions at the service of the people, and in particular of the ones that need it the most, as he said in his very last speech, recorded just a few days before leaving us. In that speech he also celebrates Europe and hope, just when hope on his life was fading away – because he was like this: thinking not of himself, but of the others, always.

*“Hope is us”, he said, “when we don’t ignore those in need, when we don’t build walls at our borders, when we fight all forms of injustice” – end of quote.*

Institutions have to serve people, he constantly said. And one of his main objectives has always been to connect institutions and citizens.

Il écrivait dans l’article que j’ai cité tout à l’heure que *« la démocratie est une conquête de tous les instants fondés sur la confiance des citoyens dans les institutions. Nous devons renouveler et reconfirmer cette relation chaque jour, la considérer comme notre meilleur investissement »* - end of quote.

The same investment that he made every day in his relation to the younger generations (something that Roberta will proudly and very successfully continue). He loved exchanging with students—he would have loved being here—, including here at the College of Europe. He loved learning from them, from you, and giving back some of his knowledge and wisdom. He believed in the power of education, and in the power of young people.

Il clôturait le même article déjà cité en écrivant :

*« Aujourd’hui plus que jamais, il est urgent de regarder là où nous sommes et vers où nous voulons aller. Nous ne pouvons pas ignorer les leçons que nous enseigne l’histoire de notre continent et de nos ancêtres. C’est une histoire riche en pages glorieuses, mais remplie aussi des souffrances et d’horreurs. Il est absolument nécessaire de privilégier la connaissance, la mémoire, la culture et l’éducation. Nous sommes tous mis à contribution, en particulier les jeunes générations, qui sont les plus actives et les plus engagées politiquement, pour dessiner l’Europe de demain. La beauté de l’Europe réside dans le débat, dans le progrès que nous accomplissons ensemble, dans la construction d’une démocratie aussi participative que possible. Je crois que telle était la volonté de nos pères fondateurs, et l’Europe d’aujourd’hui doit se montrer forte et résistante afin d’incarner à nouveau cet esprit d’innovation qui doit souffler sur nos consciences, sur nous tous, sur tous les citoyens européens. »*

He trusted you, he trusted younger generations, to “embody the spirit of innovation” that inspired the very beginning of the European integration process. And I am sure that today, he would have looked at you—so beautiful, so enthusiastic, so full of energy and joy, regardless of the difficulties of our times— he would have looked at you in this wonderful concert hall, he would have guessed your dreams, your frustrations, your worries, but most importantly your aspirations – and he would have told you what he said in January 2021 to your fellow alumni of the Soares promotion, he would have told you “don’t be élite, be leaders”. And these are his words to our students two years ago, with which I would like you to start your academic year and to continue your journey to be good Europeans.

Thank you.