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**Speech by President of the European Council
Herman Van Rompuy
on the Future of Europe at the University of Helsinki**

I'm very pleased to be in Helsinki today and to have the opportunity to meet with so many of you. All the more since the day after tomorrow, 9th of May, is Europe's day: our Union's birthday so to speak, and a good time to take a moment to think about what Europe means to us, what we want it to be, where we want it to go. At times like these, when we are searching for the right way forward, it can be good to look back at the road travelled. Winston Churchill famously said, "*the farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see*".

Our Union is not that old today, only 63, very young compared to most of our countries. But even if we can't look back that far, there's much inspiration to be found in those six decades. Since this one-day-in-May when Robert Schuman (he was foreign minister for France at the time) came up with a radical proposal to make war between our nations impossible. In time, this proposal would transform our continent.

And when we look at the very recent, historic reconciliation between Serbia and Kosovo, steered by the Union's own Catherine Ashton, we can see that this magic is still at work. But never overnight. Step by step, through concrete achievements: that was always the method. It's also good to remember these steps, also those to build the market, were always linked to concrete events and historic situations.

It was true at the beginning in 1950, with a brilliant idea put forward in the context of the start of the Cold War. An encounter of vision and necessity. It was the same, years later, when your own country joined the endeavour, after the end of the Cold War.

P R E S S

Dirk De Backer - Spokesperson of the President - ☎ +32 (0)2 281 9768 - +32 (0)497 59 99 19
Preben Aamann - Deputy Spokesperson of the President - ☎ +32 (0)2 281 2060 - +32 (0)476 85 05 43
press.president@consilium.europa.eu <http://www.european-council.europa.eu/the-president>

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Then another acceleration of history set free the space east of the Iron Curtain. In that changed situation, first, your country joined our Union (together with Sweden and Austria of course); and then, a decade later, so did the countries that had been firmly in the Soviet grip.

Since the start of the credit crisis in 2008 we live in another such transformative period, globally and in Europe. It is history in the making. The European Union has rarely been as central in public debate as it is today. Debates overshadowed by the financial crisis for sure, but at the same time debates that very much needed to happen. But I firmly believe that we will come out stronger from this experience.

We're learning not to take anything for granted. That we need to work harder to keep what we really care about. Our quality of life, our thriving economies, our position in the world. And that we also need to nurture our strongest assets: the shared freedom, the shared values and the close ties that bring together our countries, our peoples.

To me, when the last dark clouds of the crisis will have cleared, and we will be able to look back more serenely at these tumultuous years, one major change will clearly stand out. How in the crisis, our countries will have come to realise the true extent of their interdependence. In a way, the leaders were the first to experience it, and your Prime-Minister can testify to that.

Each time we gather around the table of the European Council, with 27 national leaders, the President of the Commission and myself, I perceive better how – notwithstanding all differences and divergences - we all experience this co-responsibility for our common future. And the best proof is in the decisions we take to that effect. And the citizens in all our countries have experienced, too, what it means to be in a Union. Hard truths had to be faced, and it was not always easy or pleasant. It was a moment of discovery, of 'self-discovery', of drawing the full consequences of our own earlier decisions (such as to establish a single currency). And we are doing that.

Because the crisis made clear: the situation in one country can affect all the others. And we can't allow that to happen again. That's why there's been so much work over the last few years to strengthen our common budgetary and economic rules, to set up better prevention and be able to better detect harmful bubbles and imbalances.

The important realisation is that our countries can't act or solve problems in isolation. We simply can't ignore the situation of others or the impact our decisions can have on them, because they are our neighbours, our trading partners, our currency companions. It's not always immediately visible, but we're closely tied to one another, and we need to acknowledge that better.

We mustn't forget how much we benefit from these ties but also that they come with common duties. We design joint rules, and we owe it to ourselves and to others to abide by what we have agreed. We also set ourselves joint objectives, and there also we owe it to ourselves and to others to live up to these goals.

One such goal is to patch the last holes in our common market, because we could benefit so much from doing so. “You don’t fall in love with a market” Jacques Delors used to say, even if it’s the biggest one in the world. But still, the single market is our lifeline. It’s what helped companies like Nokia to make it really big, and it’s still a goldmine of opportunities, especially for your generation. A source of freedom as much as of prosperity. And access-to-it is a much sought-after prize, for our partners in the world, from China to the United States. Acknowledging our ties; respecting the rules we have agreed; pursuing our common goals. That’s what it takes to belong to a Union.

One thing it doesn’t imply though is merging into a single identity. It doesn’t mean giving up what makes all our countries special and unique. Rather, it means acknowledging and cherishing the fact that along our other identities –national, local, maybe regional – we also have a European identity. Not ‘instead of’ of course, but ‘on top of’. As Vaclav Havel once said, if we all have our homeland, Europe can be “*the homeland of homelands*” Perhaps it is already obvious to your generation. The Erasmus generation. Why, the most famous Finnish Erasmus student is sitting right next to me on this stage!

Today, Prime Minister Katainen is the only one at the European Council. But by the time your generation takes over, I expect most leaders around the table will have shared this experience in one way or another.

In many respects, you are lucky to belong to a generation with wider horizons than any before. Your awareness of the world goes way beyond your own ‘world’ in which you grew up. Your Europe is and must remain one of openness. A Europe open to change and keen to widen its horizons further. Because in this fast-evolving world, we need to be able to adapt just as fast as the world around us.

There are global challenges – emerging economies, an ageing population, technological revolutions, and all our countries have to face them. Those up here in the North and those in the South, those in the East and those in the West. So within the Union we must avoid superficial clichés. That of (good) hardworking Northerners and (bad) lazy Southerners, or that of (good) generous Southerners and (bad) selfish Northerners. As a Belgian, a small country with its own North and South, I know all these clichés by heart! For one thing, weak growth or youth unemployment are not the monopoly of the South...

Our countries are together by choice, for a reason. Not through fatality but rather to defeat fatality. To build something bigger together, rather than just coexist. To build this, so that we can preserve the quality of life and the wealth of opportunities that our continent can offer.

A place where innovation happens every day, and where its benefits are widely shared. Where people live long and healthy lives, in some of the freest, most prosperous, but also most equal and secure societies in the world. It’s definitely worth the effort, and I dearly hope that your generation will take up the effort!