

ADDRESS
BY THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL JANEZ JANŠA
AT THE PLENARY SESSION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT

Strasbourg, 12 March 2008

Mr President of the European Parliament,
Mr President of the European Commission,
Distinguished Presidents and Representatives of National Parliaments,
Distinguished Members of the European Parliament,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

“Ce n’est pas sans émotion que je prends la parole...”¹ These are the words spoken by Robert Schuman, the first President of the European Parliamentary Assembly, on 19 March 1958 when he addressed this distinguished gathering for the first time. Fifty years on, on the occasion of this important anniversary, we share the same feeling. Here, I am not addressing only 142 national parliamentarians, but as many as 785 directly elected Members of the European Parliament. Taking a look at the path travelled and at the flourishing of European democracy over the past half century can indeed fill us with pride and a feeling of gratitude to the founding fathers responsible for the European idea. It also, at the same time, confers on us the duty to contribute, as best we can, to the continuation of the European story of peace, cooperation and prosperity.

Let us look back to the year 1958 – a society faced with the aftermath of two devastating wars, a world dominated by a bipolar, two-way trial of strength between West and East, the age of the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution, the first computer chip, the nuclear tests and the launching into orbit of the first satellites. At that time, the six Member States of the European Communities brought together 168 million Europeans, healed the wounds of the war, made economic progress and, together with the Euro-Atlantic alliance, safeguarded an area of freedom and democracy. In the meantime, most of the remaining part of Europe, regrettably, existed in a totalitarian environment, stagnating or even lagging behind in terms of economy and civilisation.

An entirely different image presents itself in 2008: a multipolar world, which is not just about economic or political competition but, increasingly, also about cooperation in seeking answers to the challenges we currently face. The elimination of the borders that once divided Europe – from the Berlin Wall, the iron curtain to internal border checks – will continue at the end of this month with the elimination of air borders within the expanded Schengen area. Today, the EU covers a surface area more than three times the size of the initial Community fifty years ago; it has three times more inhabitants, twenty-three official languages, a strengthened internal market and a common currency; its inhabitants live, on average, eight years longer. Twenty-seven Heads of State and Government, more than a third of whom were living under totalitarian regimes less than twenty years ago, will be taking decisions tomorrow around the same table. Practically all of wider Europe now also lives in freedom and democracy. This is an achievement worth embracing and celebrating.

I. European Parliament – a mirror of, and vehicle for, democratic change

The existence and the operation of the European Parliament from 1958 until the present day is a direct reflection of the progress achieved in the process of integration over the past fifty years. From fulfilling a consultative role at the beginning, you acquired initial powers in the area of the Community budget in the early 1970s and, at the end of the 1970s, the first direct elections were held. The new Treaties brought strengthened powers with regard to the adoption of legislation and the appointment of the top European political representatives. The European Commission as it is now cannot exist without your confidence.

In the same way that the Treaties of Rome brought new responsibilities to the Parliamentary Assembly in 1958, the Lisbon Treaty fifty years on signifies a major step forward for the European Parliament: the codecision procedure will be extended to almost all European policy areas and Parliament's role will be enhanced in democratic supervision, concluding international treaties and appointing the top European representatives.

It gives me great pleasure to note that you approved the Report on the Lisbon Reform Treaty with such an overwhelming majority at the plenary session last month. I would also like to congratulate all the Member States who have already successfully completed their ratification procedures; I indeed hope that the remaining ones will soon follow suit.

II. The Lisbon Treaty as the EU's response to global challenges

If the first fifty years of the EU have been dedicated to the European agenda – to our own political and economic development and reform – the next fifty years will most certainly also bring the global agenda to the forefront of our attention. The list of subjects for tomorrow's European Council clearly testifies to this. It is perfectly clear that we shall not provide appropriate answers to the "Lisbon" challenges, energy and climate change issues and turmoil on the financial markets unless we also take global trends and global stakeholders into consideration and include them all in our activities.

This also applies to the fields of human rights and intercultural dialogue, in which you, the Members of the European Parliament, undoubtedly have a leading role. On behalf of the European Council, I would like to take this opportunity to commend you for the active role you have played in drawing attention to violations of human rights, in monitoring elections and in deploying your delegations within international institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council. Through the joint parliamentary assemblies you also play an important role which gives added value to EU policies in respect of non-EU countries and regions. Through your activities and meetings with distinguished guests in this Year of Intercultural Dialogue, you are enhancing one of the fundamental European traditions, namely that mutual respect and understanding are the very foundation of coexistence at both the European and the world level.

III. The European Union is most successful when it acts as one

The range of EU activities is increasing all the time but a single rule applies to them all: success is directly proportional to unity – unity between Member States, sectors, interest groups, generations, and between regional, national, European and world factors. It is important that the EU institutions set an example in this regard.

“Each man begins the world afresh. Only institutions grow wiser; they accumulate collective experience.” With this thought, Jean Monnet brings us a step closer to understanding why the perception of the EU is often still at variance with the reality of the EU, and why many Europeans – despite the more than obvious achievements of the past fifty years – still have doubts about the benefits of European integration. In order to understand and appreciate freedom, peace, diversity, the elimination of borders and the benefits and prospects afforded by a united Europe, we have to be aware, once and for all, that there are also other, far less favourable alternatives.

Our joint task is therefore to promote the European collective experience. From this experience, we can draw the strength to address current challenges. Looking back must go hand in hand with thinking ahead. Had we not joined forces fifty years ago, we would probably not be living in peace and prosperity today. The same is true of the next fifty years. Unless we together seek out low-carbon and energysaving solutions, we will not succeed in halting climate change. We will face ever more intense flooding, hurricanes, drought, new diseases, endangered ecosystems and “climate refugees”. It is essential that the results of Europe’s decisions and activities be sufficiently tangible for citizens to understand the crucial role of the EU in preserving and improving their quality of life.

Mr President,

Members of the European Parliament,

I would like to thank you for your contribution to the development of the European Union over the past half century. I know what this time represents for our generation, being born myself in the same year as the European Parliament. I wish you every success in your work until the end of this term of office, and beyond, plenty of fresh ideas and unwavering persistence in developing European values, European democracy and a European way of life. It is my firm belief that the next major anniversary of this home of European democracy will be an opportunity to see just how far down the road we have come and to celebrate Europe’s clearly visible progress.