

## Herman Van Rompuy's speech at the ceremonial meeting of the UL Senate on the 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the University foundation.

*It is a great privilege for me to become an honorary doctor of this great university here today. It will most probably be my last honorary doctorate in my life. This ceremony is also unique for another reason. I hope I will be the last online laureate in the history of the university!*

*The core concepts of the Union 70 years ago were peace, reconciliation, freedom, the single market. What are the key words today in that other world, even in that other civilisation in which we live? I would add: what are the words we should be using?*

***First of all, unity remains more important than ever.***

*We showed with 27 member states after the Brexit referendum how we formed one bloc. The UK could not negotiate with Paris and Berlin. The latter did not even want to. For four years there was one negotiator on behalf of 440 million Europeans. It is often said that if one country does not want to cooperate then the Union is divided, but when it comes to sanctions against Russia and China we take the necessary unanimous decisions. Without unity there can be no geopolitical role. Both go together.*

The 27 Member States are sovereign countries entitled to defend their national interest but there is also a higher European interest. Both can coincide. The European Council of Heads of State or Government must work on this symbiosis. Compromise is part of the very essence of the Union. Anyone entering the meeting room of the European Council knows they have to reach an agreement. We are still succeeding. During my mandate, I heard countless times that the eurozone and thus the Union would fall apart. It did not happen. One reason is that there remains a deep political will to preserve and deepen the European project. Without that conviction, nothing is possible in the long run. The Union has had a very difficult time since 2008, when the “multiple crisis” broke out. One crisis followed another, most of which had an external, non-European cause but had a major impact on the Union. And yet the European caravan continued to move forward, even without the UK.

I do not know what the future will bring for the world. In our interdependent world, the crisis of one is also the crisis of the other. We have known this since the financial crisis and certainly since the pandemic. In terms of climate, too, we are in the same storm worldwide. We are not often in the same boat, however. In the Union, we are. That is called solidarity. But that too is a verb.

**A second word is solidarity.**

We already showed it during the eurozone crisis. Of course, it was in the interest of all euro countries that Greece remained a member, but there was more to it than just the defence of interests. Not everything is economics although economics is in everything. In politics as in personal life, there is a mix of ideals and interests. That is why we helped countries to remain members of the monetary union.

By the way, in every European budget there are transfers to a number of countries that are less prosperous than the rest, to help them catch up. Which also happened. Sometimes that is about 2 to 4% of their GDP. That is the ‘de facto’ solidarity that Robert Schuman talked about on 9 May 1950.

But recently, the Recovery Fund as large as 5% of the Union's GDP is a huge demonstration of solidarity with the countries most affected by the pandemic.

The joint procurement of vaccines is also a strong example of solidarity. Larger Member States could have obtained enough vaccines in any case, but smaller ones could not. We decided to do it together. We did not do like the UK and the US: own vaccines for our own people. Initially, things were a bit slower in the EU because of that, but we will have administered more vaccines to the adult population by the beginning of July than the US. I would add that we have considerably fewer casualties than the US and the UK.

In terms of solidarity with those countries that, due to their geographical location, have far more asylum seekers and refugees than other countries, a number of countries are failing badly.

Solidarity with people in one's own circle or one's own country is much easier than with those who are further away. That kind of solidarity requires an effort, a transcending of one's own ego.

**A third key word is sovereignty, in the sense of European sovereignty.**

In the language of the Union, this is translated as 'strategic autonomy'. Today's world is governed less and less by rules and treaties but by brute force. In France, there is a well-known saying: 'you are legally wrong because you are politically in a minority'. The multilateral order was rules-based. Today, it is mostly paid lip service to. Yet multilateralism has made us highly interdependent. Globalisation has exactly that characteristic. But there are limits to this interdependence. During this corona crisis we discovered that in certain strategic areas we have become too dependent. I am thinking of medical equipment and medicines, of the digital and everything related to it, from rare raw materials to chips, so important for electronic devices and cars.

The EU had already realised in the Trump era that we had to rely more on ourselves in the area of defence. The goal of becoming climate-neutral by 2050 will also make us much less dependent on fossil fuels and therefore also on Russian gas. We must also do more to protect our own external borders, especially in the Mediterranean. The Union will also not allow its strategic

economic sectors to simply fall into the hands of non-EU companies and countries. The list of excessive dependencies is long. However, the EU does not want to fall into protectionism. That is why it wants free and fair trade in line with WTO rules. That is why it wants to fight against trade distortions caused by state subsidies. In recent years and in recent months, the Commission has launched numerous initiatives. The time for naivety is over. But, as I said: the Union is not a fortress. For example, we exported almost as many doses of vaccines produced in our countries as we kept for ourselves.

The best way to be economically sovereign is to be competitive. That requires an effort on the part of each member state to be forward-looking and it requires a concerted effort. In the global economy, scale and size matter. Even large European companies are often too small on the world market. Also in scientific research, institutes and universities have to join forces. The European budget and the Recovery Fund provide new financial opportunities for this.

The Union itself imposes standards on its own market that can dominate the world in terms of climate, working conditions and privacy. Companies that are active on our territory must also pay taxes here. This has nothing to do with protectionism, but with guaranteeing a level playing field, with justice.

**A fourth key word is democracy.**

The former fascist and communist countries found refuge from dictatorship in the European Union. The Union itself is built on the rule of law. A Union without respect for this makes no sense. Then it would only be an economic club. In such a club there is no common destiny. Democracy is under pressure in the EU and in the West at large. The attack on Capitol Hill in Washington is a good example of what it leads to when democracy is not seen as a value in itself but as an instrument to gain and keep power. Above power there is the law and above the law there are ethics. Above any national law are the European values.

Democracy must also achieve results to remain credible. It has to protect people from all kinds of threats such as unemployment, job insecurity, climate change, corruption and fraud,

inequalities, terrorism, foreign aggression, etc. Democracy must ‘deliver’ in all these areas. But democracy, like the European idea, needs defenders, especially among political and intellectual leaders. I repeat that democracy is a value in itself. It cannot live in a negative climate. Democracy is dialogue, conversation. Politics is a struggle for power but we need a framework of respect for each other, listening to each other, of renunciation of one’s own rightness, of self-relativisation, in short the opposite of a culture of polarisation and demonisation.

What we defend inwardly, within the EU, we also defend outwardly and vice versa. So in foreign policy too, we cannot remain silent about human rights and human dignity. Other global actors must get used to this. This does not mean that we only cooperate economically and ecologically with like-minded countries. We must be clear about our principles and, at the same time, always be prepared to engage in dialogue with others for the sake of our interests and of the general good of mankind. I am thinking in particular of the climate. That is why we must continue to work towards stronger global governance. The less the time is ripe, the more we must do to make it ripe.

In this world where old and new global actors are looking for their place, the EU as a sovereign entity has allies with whom it shares values and interests, though not all the time and not the same ones. For the EU, therefore, the US and China are not at all equidistant.

### **The fifth word is ‘culture’.**

Of course, in Europe, as elsewhere on our planet, we have not always sufficiently controlled human nature’s brutality by culture. The saddest are the wars, from the barbaric Thirty Years’ War in the 17th century to the Holocaust. Poland’s own history is one of the most tragic in Europe. None of this has prevented the uniqueness of European culture, with its philosophy going back to the Greek thinkers, with Christianity of course, with its architecture, art and music. In the midst of suffering, we have continued to search for truth, goodness and beauty. In times of confusion like these, one must return to the core questions. Aristotle did this when he asked what the essence of life was. His answer was: ‘to serve others and to do the good’. Is that a dream? But without dreams, only wilderness and hell await us.

*By the way, the motto of this university is: ‘veritas et libertas’, truth and freedom. The journey of seeking is never over. The quest can only take place in a spirit of freedom. Thoughts are free. Our universities played and are playing a major role in this. This university is relatively young, but it is part of a great European tradition of centres of thought and research. Polish academic traditions date back to the 14th century. Some of Europe’s oldest universities can be found in Poland.*

*Europe must be the synthesis of the old and the new, of the best of the old and the new. A Europe that is rooted, has learned from history and always remains hopeful.*