



Brexit Institute

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Text of address by Hans-Gert Pöttering, (President Emeritus of the European Parliament)

Check against delivery

Your excellency Ambassador Michele Valensise

Michael McAteer

Professor Fabbrini

Distinguished panellists

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me start by thanking you for inviting me to give this keynote speech at today's event. If I say it is a pleasure to be here, I would like to put less emphasis on the first part of the conference title "Brexit- and the New EU Institutional Cycle". Allow me to put more emphasis on the second part. It is a pleasure to be here and talk about the Future of the EU with you.

The launch of the new Masters programme '*EU Law and Policy*' is therefore a great occasion to look at the future - hopefully with constructive debates and informed decision-making of this new European cohort of scholars!

The result of the United Kingdom's national referendum on the 23 June 2016 to leave the European Union - from then on commonly referred to as 'Brexit' - is what I call the biggest defeat in the history of the EU. Dublin City University Brexit Institute has been founded as a result of the referendum. In their mission statement, the institute calls Brexit "arguably the most important political event in Europe since the Fall of the Berlin Wall". I wholeheartedly support this assessment. On the positive side - it has led to the founding of such an excellent institution that brings together experts, politicians, academia representatives and the public to talk about the relations between the UK and the EU. I wish it had not have needed 'Brexit' to create this institution!

For his research, Professor Fabbrini has recently been awarded the *Charlemagne Prize Fellowship Award*, which rewards outstanding work for social progress and mutual understanding as well as work in service of European unification. I

congratulate you, Professor Fabbrini, not only on the award but also on the valuable work of the Brexit Institute!

Lastly, would also like to thank *Villa Vigoni, the German-Italian Centre for European Excellence and Ambassador Valensise*, for supporting not only this event but also many others. Villa Vigoni facilitates communication between European representatives of different countries and strengthens European relations. Only by sharing ideas and visions, we can work together to advance the European project!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is part of human nature to acknowledge a comfortable situation only when its already gone. Likewise, we tend to forget historic events rather quickly and remember them in a less than accurate manner.

People's historical memory is limited. Progress is taken for granted while critical developments are resignedly accepted as seemingly inevitable. Though it's the people themselves that are capable of shaping the future - in a parliamentary democracy via their elected representatives.

This is both the content as well as the meaning of freedom and democracy. In this scenario, freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin. This is our chance for a good development in European Union as the free and democratic core of our European continent.

Before we focus on the future, let's take a moment to take a look back at the year 1979 - not for nostalgic reasons but in order to relive the way until the year 2019 - the way which is prerequisite and part of our advancement into the future.

On 7 June 1979, elections were held in Great Britain, Ireland and in the Netherlands, on 10 June 1979, in Belgium, in the (not yet reunited) Federal Republic of Germany, Denmark, France, Italy and Luxembourg.

On 23 May 2019, elections were held in Ireland, in the Netherlands and in Great Britain - and on 26 May 2019, elections were held in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Roughly 500 million people live in these 28 countries and the individual naming them is not so much a numerical exercise but the expression of what, back in 1979, has been unimaginable - the historic change towards, freedom, democracy, rule of law and peace.

Only the triumph over the dictatorships in Greece, Spain and Portugal in the 1970s and the collapse of the totalitarian communist regime in 1989/90 allowed for these countries to accede to the community of shared value that is the European Union.

To be part of this European community of shared values, which at its core has the dignity of each individual human being, was the intrinsic need of the people. To defend this community of values - both outward as well as inward - should be the highest priority for the European Union now and in the future.

Arguably, being part of this community was conducive towards putting an end to the deadly conflict that has afflicted this very island for almost 30 years during the last century. On 10 April 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed and together with the referenda thereafter, it ensured the validity of the European values since then.

Here in Ireland, the memory of The Troubles - those times when there was no peace - is still very vivid; maybe it is more vivid than the memory of similar times in some of the neighbouring countries.

In Germany and in several other European countries, the generation of the 90's which was born after the fall of the Berlin Wall was lucky enough to never have witnessed a divided country or a state of military conflict. This is not to excuse a lack of awareness for the preciousness of the current union we have - but maybe it is an explanation for why in the Irish perception, the threat of losing freedom of mobility and trade between countries and the ability to settle disputes peacefully through shared institutes of debate is more present than in other perceptions.

We should make an effort and not get too comfortable and forget the past - but actively appreciate the good we have and work together to improve it in the future!

Ladies and Gentlemen, the European Union has adversaries - both from within as well as externally. The Russian president has called the collapse of the Soviet Union 'the biggest tragedy of the 20th century'. A similar development for the European Union would probably not only please him - at times, it seems like he has exactly that goal in mind.

The U.S. president has welcomed Brexit even though the United States of America has supported European integration ever since the days of Harry S. Truman. This, however, does not apply to the incumbent president. For him, 'deals' with the entirety of the European Union are more difficult than bilateral agreements with each of its member states. Therefore, the joint acting of all EU countries is of paramount importance! For 'transatlantics', as I like to consider myself, it is painful to express this perception and to think about the resulting consequences. It is so important that we have a united trade policy there, the European Union is united.

There are also destructive forces from within. To name only one example, the European Union had to deal with disinformation and Fake News in their last elections. This is also seen in democratic countries all over the world. With regard to National Socialist propaganda, the French writer Éric Vuillard, wrote the following: "Intrigue triumph over facts". Today this scenario looms as well.

We have to react both with courage and determination. Nationalism leads back into the past with all the known tragedies. Only a Europe of cooperation can safeguard European values and interests.

We need courage and determination- because only a European Union that is strong and capable of acting can defend our values and interests.

Values: by that I mean human dignity, freedom, democracy, legal order, and peace. Interests: belonging to the European Single Market and a competitive social market economy. Then we have interests to develop, which are a challenge for the new Commission to develop, including digital single market; competitiveness; joint acting in foreign, security and defence policy- such as the further development of the concept of a European Army; common asylum and migration policies; energy security; climate protection and environmental protection (-the integrity of creation) and so on. The defence of European values has to take place on all levels: both on municipal, regional as well as on national and European level.

According to different types of adversaries- from within from the exterior- we need different types of defence. Firstly, I mean defence in the classical sense of military - or 'hard' - security. The global threat map has changed considerably over the last 30 years. The European foreign and security policy therefore has to continue to adapt on a national and on a European level.

Secondly, I mean defence in the sense of 'soft' security. We must protect the institutions that constitute and safeguard our values from dismantling and our alliances from crumbling.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to elaborate on the first point.

After decades of immediate and all-too-present danger during the Cold War, European have entered an era of peace and stability. In large part, that is the consequence of the incomparable success of the project of European integration and NATO partnership. Yet, over the past years, political leaders, journalists, and citizens alike have been increasingly occupied with challenges in Syria, North Africa and Ukraine, which have sparked a profound, yet still elite driven, debate about European cooperation and engagement.

U.S. President Trump has - like his predecessors - called upon the NATO members to do a fair burden sharing. Each member should live up to the mutually agreed upon goal of spending 2% of the national GDP on defence. This demand is not new and has also been brought forward by previous U.S. administrations - it has been reiterated by the U.S. side at the NATO summit last week.

For historic reasons, in Germany there is a certain reluctance when it comes to meeting this requirement. At the same time, the - let's say special - leadership style of the current U.S. administration has caused a diminished trust of the European public in our American allies. People are insecure whether the U.S. will be always at our side when it comes to military security. In fact, the U.S. has already shown in Syria what can happen when Europe is unprepared for an American withdrawal. Therefore, Europe will be required to take on more responsibility for own security and the stability of its neighbourhood.

The statement by the French President Macron, calling NATO 'brain dead', has caused vehement objections on the European side. I would like to reply: Is this from President Macron a call to wake up the others, or as one could understand, or does he mean that NATO needs to be taken into question? If this is so, it would be

dangerous as this would divide the European Union. Those who question NATO do not promote European “sovereignty” but split Europe.

We should not underestimate the capacity for renewal and reform of our Western community of shared values. This applied equally for the European Union as well as for NATO. Our goal must be to strengthen the European pillar of NATO in the sense of a defence union, an army of European. Despite all the difficulties, I am convinced that both institutions, the EU as well as NATO are success stories with a great history. If we work together to develop them, both will have a great future.

In the speech by President von der Leyen when presenting her College of Commissioners, I was pleased to see that a lot of emphasis was put on the protection of our European values. President von der Leyen stated that her commission was going to be a ‘geopolitical’ one. Strengthening the European defence against external threats towards a strategic autonomy will therefore be the EU’s task for the next decades.

This also includes the cyberspace, where due to rapidly proceeding digitisation new security threats emerge. These threats bridge the fields of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ security. Cyber threats can target both critical infrastructure as well as our democratic debate via social media. Keeping pace with rapidly changing security threats will become increasingly more difficult, regardless of the country.

In the cyber field, a new form geostrategic competition is emerging. Russia and China are taking the stance of imposing national internet surveillance and control. In the framework of the UN, the West is trying to put a model of shared, responsible governance and multilateral collaboration against it.

The European Union wants to protect its values also in the digital sphere by striking a balance between the opportunities that digitalisation has to offer and the dangers that it entails. This is an important focus of the new commission because more and more part of our lives are shifted into the digital sphere- we need to step up protection here as well!

Especially lower-income countries, have a hard time investing enough in their cyber infrastructure which is why the Russian and Chinese cyber-sovereignty model might create the illusion of proactive, tactical methods to manage cyber security threats. This tendency is dangerous for a value community like the European Union because it promotes disinformation campaigns and new means to censor internal demonstrations. To meet these challenges, we need a common understanding of emerging security risks across the international community, driven by incentives for a shared approach to prevention.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me move to the second point, the ‘softer’ but not less pressing policy issues.

In some countries of the European Union, the rule of law is particularly under pressure. As Guardian of the Treaties, it is the European Commission's duty to constructively engage with the respective governments and parliaments to jointly work together towards safeguarding the validity of the values. In this process

parliamentary majorities have to respect the fundamental principles of the rule of law and the pluralist democracy - including the right of minorities. The European Parliament is an important pillar in this “connected” or “multilevel democracy”.

The EU is a legal community. Differences in interests as well as conflicts are resolved in a peaceful way by means of dialogue and legal remedies. But in order to come to fair solutions in disputes, all members of the community have to respect the laws! Our justice system and its dispute resolution mechanism is a historic achievement. It shall be respected by all members equally! The last word must be by the European High Court in Luxembourg.

The same laws apply to all when it comes to participation, we should also stand together in solidarity in times of crisis. In 2008, I was honoured to speak in front of the Northern Irish parliament in Belfast. I said “The current crisis teaches us unambiguously that isolated, uncoordinated and national actions will not yield ideal solutions. Only the sharing of responsibilities can lead to ideal solutions for the entire union”. I continued “We need European approaches in order to brace ourselves for the future”.

Back then, I was talking about the financial and economic crisis. But the statement could have been equally said in response to the crisis that started in 2015.

The war in Syria has had catastrophic consequences for the entire country and the neighbouring regions - and in 2015, we witnessed the consequences of this terrible tragedy that has been going on for far too long already. What was called ‘migration crisis’ put the union and individual member states’ solidarity to the test - where countries with external borders had to carry most of the burden.

Unfortunately, the war is still unresolved - and if we look around in the global news, more crises seem to come. So we need to brace ourselves for a future where an increasing number of people live on this planet - and most of them in less ideal situations than the one that we are lucky to live in. Therefore, the member states have to think about how to cherish what we have - our homes - while simultaneously not forget the ones that are affected by war and hardships.

Home, or one’s native origin - ‘Heimat’ as we say in German - as well as the homeland and Europe - these three entities together jointly form our identity. We have to be aware that those who exclusive focus on their ‘Heimet’ will not be able to protect it: those who place nation above all else will turn into nationalists; and nationalism leads to war. Those who only identify as European have no roots.

If we understand identity as the triad of ‘Heimet’, homeland and Europe we are simultaneously patriotic and good Europeans.

In the coming decades, our ‘Heimat’ will be under pressure from another side as well - extreme weather phenomenon, droughts, and water scarcity or floods will be more common in the years to come - we need to focus more on protecting the environment that enables us to live good lives. The new commission has pledged a

“generational transition towards climate neutrality by mid-century” - an important step to preserve this continent that we call home.

In light of these challenges - if not threats - which the European Union has to deal with today, the original idea of the European project cannot be emphasized enough. At its core, European integration is a peace project.

Peace in Europe cannot be taken for granted. The assessment that Europe has witnessed 70 years of peace is incorrect. In the 1990s, a terrible war was raging in the Balkans and today - due to the Russian aggression and the illegal occupation of Crimea - we are facing a military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. There was and there is peace - but only between those countries that participates in the European integration project.

The European Union is not paradise on earth - but a very good place to live in peace on this earth. It is our responsibility to keep it this way! The strength of European Union lies in our shared values- the respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law and peace. This applies equally if one country unfortunately - decides to - leave the union - it will still remain a close partnership.

Thank you for your attention.