



**Speech by His Majesty the King of the Belgians  
on the occasion of the formal sitting of the European Parliament  
Hemicycle, Paul-Henri Spaak Building,  
Brussels, 10 April 2024**

Madam President,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

The European institutions have been based here in Brussels since the beginning. And this Paul-Henri Spaak Building, named in honour of the historic Belgian pioneer of the European project, is the beating heart of European democracy. This is where the aspirations, wishes, concerns and grievances of 450 million European citizens are expressed.

For every Member State, the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU is a high point in their participation in European decision-making. Belgium is of course no exception in this regard. I am therefore delighted that crucial legislative progress has been made, together with your Assembly, in these recent months under the Belgian Presidency. In the coming months, we will also fundamentally think about the future of our Union. We also have major challenges ahead of us in the area of enlargement. We will continue to work with conviction and focus, because belief in Europe is in our DNA.

I also personally feel this bond with Europe very strongly. Not only as a head of state and as a Belgian, but also as an individual. My family tree bears witness to the historical cross-fertilisation between the nations of Europe. For all Europeans, the colourful heritage of our predecessors, and the experi-



ences we garner along the way, make us who we are. This multi-faceted and multi-layered interweaving of cultures is a source of incredible enrichment. It connects us to the destiny of others. It motivates us to leave behind a stable and prosperous living environment for our loved ones and for future generations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We view our mandate as President of the Council through the lens of hope. In these times of war, uncertainty and societal unrest, Europe and the world are in dire need of hope. Hope is not a dream, it is based on facts. Hope is the belief that we can achieve something better, something higher, and that our contribution makes a difference.

People often highlight the divisions within the Union. But in our support for Ukraine in particular, we have shown that we can take strong decisions in unity. The struggle in Ukraine is our battle too. It is about defending our security, and our values. We too feel threatened. And rightly so.

We demonstrated the same unity following the Brexit referendum. Similarly, Member States showed solidarity in the fight against the corona pandemic, with unprecedented initiatives for the joint procurement of vaccines, and the



European Economic Recovery Programme. At every crisis, at every moment of transition, we testify to our unity and resoluteness.

But the European Union is more than just crisis management. It must be driven forward by a long-term vision.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As such, we must remain united in the fight against climate change. In 2020, we met the objectives on greenhouse gas emissions. Since 1990, the European economy has grown by 60%, while emissions have dropped by 30%. But the road to achieving our objectives for 2030 and 2050 is still long, and in global terms, emissions are sadly increasing.

Climate policy also helps us achieve that other great ambition: the strategic independence of the EU. The more we make our energy consumption renewable, the less dependent we are on imported energy. Last year, wind and solar were more important than all other European energy sources. Let us stay on this course, while ensuring that the strongest shoulders bear the heaviest burdens. On the climate stage, the European Union is an essential geopolitical actor, the pre-eminent *geo-ecological* actor.



Ladies and Gentlemen,

Events in recent years have also taught us to stop being naive.

We do not want to be sleepwalkers. On the contrary, let us be more resolute in putting our fate into our own hands. The Union is still far too much fragmented. Let us imagine a new “great European revolution of our time: the revolution which aims at substituting unity in freedom and in diversity for national rivalries”, as Jean Monnet proposed in his day. For the single market of Jacques Delors is not yet sufficiently harmonised, whether as regards economic governance, capital markets or research and innovation. In today’s world, where economies of scale are so crucial, companies can work together even more effectively, in particular in respect of new technologies. We must not miss the boat on electric mobility, semiconductors, batteries, rare earth minerals and artificial intelligence. We are still too often lagging behind in terms of invention, but especially in terms of innovation.

Of course, the solution will involve advocating for open markets and ensuring a level playing field for our imports.

One of the most important mechanisms for achieving this autonomy is to boost our own competitiveness. Nevertheless, we are aware of our shortcomings in a number of areas. Let us work together towards a true European reindustrialisation, aimed at the green and digital revolutions, and which is about



much more than a simple transition. A reindustrialisation of Europe is greater than the sum of 27 industrial policies. If the European budget does not allow us to bring this about, we need to dare to consider other avenues of financing. Investment requires a long-term vision, and a robust and benign regulatory framework.

In any event, we need to take even more of our economic fate into our own hands. Let us dare to dream of a future in which the Union plays an even greater *geo-economic* role.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The construction of Europe is a formidable journey, one step at a time. Negotiations with certain countries from our Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans will soon take place. Expanding the Union also means strengthening it. The 27 will be called to act more decisively, especially if we are to have more Member States. But in line with the Conference on the Future of Europe, we need to draw some conclusions from past crises. At the start of the coronavirus pandemic, our fellow citizens did not understand that countries were acting from disparate positions. They were asking for more Europe, not less Europe.

It is no less crucial to demonstrate European decisiveness in the areas of health, migration, defence and security, as we have shown in the areas of the



environment and digitisation. In terms of security, specifically, we have already come a long way. But the European security dimension could yet stand some serious improvement. Particularly in these uncertain times, when even long-standing alliances are coming under pressure.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We need to emphasise the social dimension as to the future of Europe. The European pillar of social rights proclaimed in 2017 remains the reference point in this regard.

What sets Europe apart from other major actors is that wealth creation is supplemented by robust social justice mechanisms. This complementarity is essential to ensure that young people, the citizens of tomorrow, keep their faith in Europe. Many young people are critical of our way of life and the political world. At the same time, they have an incredible capacity to get things moving.

Within our Union, there are unprecedented opportunities to look beyond borders, understand other perspectives and acquire new understanding. Thanks to the Erasmus programme, my country welcomes more than 20,000 students every year, while just as many Belgians find their way to another country. This is vital to bolster the trust of our young people in the freedom of movement, open-mindedness and solidarity that characterise our democratic area.



Ladies and Gentlemen,

I know how the defence of democracy within the Union is alive and well within these walls of the European Parliament. More than ever, we are called upon to defend our values, both inside and outside the Union. This demands that we are consistent in our approach. Defending democracy or our freedoms should be self-evident.

I am worried about the loss of faith and trust in our institutions, and about the growing autocratic trend around the world. That is why our institutions will need to work on greater credibility as to their own operations. As such, the policies adopted must be directed towards the main concerns and fears of citizens, by presenting them results. We therefore need to involve citizens themselves more closely in democratic processes. My country is home to various promising initiatives in the area of citizen participation.

Democracy is not only a guarantee of freedom and justice, but also of human values, including our capacity to feel indignation in the face of the suffering of people caught up in inhumane wars. The current global crisis therefore has a moral dimension. Individuals must remain the measure in all things, and cannot be the possession of a state, or used to glorify a leader, a single religion or a single ethnic group. Europe should be the home of humanity. May it therefore be the driving force behind *geopolitics of humanity*.



Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to end with a thought from Vaclav Havel:  
“I see these twelve stars of the European flag as a reminder that the world  
could become a better place if, from time to time, we had the courage to look  
up at the stars.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As has always been the case, and especially in its current role as President of  
the Council, my country is at the service of the Union and its agenda, as de-  
termined by the Council and the Parliament. We aim to protect, strengthen  
and prepare our Europe for the future. With conviction, confidence and hope.

Thank you.