

Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Halbe Zijlstra, to the  
EU ambassadors, 9 November 2017

Your Excellencies,

As of today, I've been in office for two weeks. So, in a way,  
speaking to you here today is one of my first big tests.

I trust you have all read the government's *Regeerakkoord*?

It's available in English, so you may have studied it in detail.  
You might even have it on your bedside table. Don't worry, I  
won't be testing you during lunch. But I hope you'll allow me to  
give you a brief summary just in case you don't recall every  
single detail.

I think we can safely say that the Dutch people have given us a mandate for active foreign policy, which demonstrates continuity. But which also includes new areas of emphasis and fresh investment:

- in our diplomatic service;
- in our armed forces; and
- in our international cooperation.

Your Excellencies, the new Dutch government has been very clear: the Netherlands will honour its international commitments. Towards NATO. Towards the UN. Towards the EU. And next year, when we take up our seat on the UN Security Council.

In September this year, the previous government prolonged our participation in three military missions (Mali, the anti-ISIS coalition and Afghanistan). We will stand by that decision.

Firstly, because we respect our commitments.

But more importantly because we believe that these missions make a vital contribution to peace and stability in Europe's

neighbourhood, and thus directly serve European and Dutch interests.

I trust you will follow the parliamentary debate on these missions next month.

You will also see continuity where the international legal order is concerned.

Making the international system stronger is not only our privilege and our task. We owe it to our past, to our present and to our future. Ever since the time of Hugo Grotius, we've been convinced of the need for an international legal system based on rules to make us prosperous and safe.

This city, The Hague, is renowned as the legal capital of the world. It is home to many international courts, legal institutions and international organisations. And the new government remains as committed to this tradition as ever.

And this brings me to Europe, and European cooperation. Here you can expect continuity, too. With one or two new areas of emphasis.

Our own European history has taught us that we cannot take our prosperity and security for granted. I was a 20-year-old student when the Berlin Wall came down. It had a profound effect on me. For so many years, our old continent had been divided. For so many years, a cruel system had oppressed millions of innocent people. For so many years, half of the European population had *not been free*.

Today, we are all working together on this fascinating project we call the EU. That's no small achievement. All those countries made the transition to free market economies. They got the opportunity to become free and open societies. And they were successfully integrated in the Union.

Imagine, just for a moment, that the EU didn't exist.

- Travelling from here to Paris would take ages.

- Burdensome border controls would make life harder for everyone: tourists, business people and students alike.
- Trade barriers and tariffs would make goods and services much more expensive.
- And it would be far more difficult for our children to study in another EU country.

But I suspect I am preaching to the choir. You, of course, are well aware of the Union's advantages. But large sections of our populations are not. Not any longer.

Across Europe, people have grown increasingly sceptical. Instead of seeing the EU as part of the solution they see it as part of the problem. They ask: what has the EU ever done for me?

To some, the Union is at best a marriage of convenience. To others, it is not even that – they dream of divorce.

I don't think we should be deaf to these views.

We should listen to people's concerns and anxieties. And take them seriously. We all saw what happened in the UK.

Clearly, Brexit is very bad news. It's bad for the UK, it's bad for the EU, and it's bad for the Netherlands. But Brexit does indeed mean Brexit. So we should try to make it as civilised and well-organised as possible.

There can be no doubt that it will hurt us all.

The Netherlands will lose an important ally within the EU. A like-minded partner on issues of trade and liberty. But Brexit is also an opportunity for the remaining 27 to get it right.

To get our narrative right. To get our house in order. We should dare to defend, reform and explain this incredible project called Europe. To make it work better. Reform is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

Of course, you don't have to agree with every single proposal put forward by President Macron or President Juncker. But it's important that new ideas are being proposed.

It's too early to give you our comprehensive vision on the future of Europe, let me say this.

I believe we should never base our agenda on fear.

Nor should we embrace nostalgia for a past that never existed.

Or go for the easy solutions that some are proposing:

- retreat from the Union;
- abolish it altogether;
- dismantle the euro.

The problem with easy solutions is this: they don't exist. They don't work. They're a lie. Or at best a fairy tale.

To me a European Union that is fit for the future has three key dimensions at its core:

- 1) It's an indispensable *structure* to help us tackle global problems;
- 2) It's a *community of values* and shared beliefs;
- 3) And it's a *vibrant market* full of opportunities.

Allow me to elaborate briefly on these points.

We live in a world of crisis and rapid transformation. We are witnessing climate change, an energy transition, a refugee crisis, and transnational crime and terror. Surrounding our continent we see instability, chaos, conflict and many displaced people.

And so, even though the world is now more prosperous than ever before, it has also become more complex than ever before – and more challenging to manage. A country like the Netherlands can't possibly solve all these problems alone.

And I think the same is true for bigger countries like Germany, France, Italy and Spain. I believe that in the geopolitical reality of the 21st century, no European country can go it alone.

No country is an island, as the saying goes. To me, this is the primary rationale for our Union. Stronger together, better together. When it comes to the big challenges (like migration, climate change and terrorism) we can only change things if we work together to find solutions.

But beyond the geopolitical reality is the second fundamental dimension of our Union: the values we share and hold dear. Of course, this has a lot to do with our shared past. Our violent history. Culminating in two World Wars in which we almost destroyed ourselves.

I realise that, to newer generations, the rallying cry of 'never again!', '*Nie wieder Krieg*', '*plus jamais ça*' doesn't mean the same as it does to us. Or to our parents.

But where else in the world can you find a group of 28 free nations that respect fundamental freedoms and human rights? An entire continent where journalists can do their work without fear and can hold power to account? Where judges are independent and render judgment in a free and fair manner?

I am a *liberal* politician. I am a member of the People's Party for *Freedom and Democracy*. I believe that where citizens are free, and where they can choose their leaders in liberty, people are happier and society as a whole is better served. This model is one of our great inventions. And it is worth protecting. These values are vulnerable and need to be fostered and defended against authoritarian governments. Including on our own continent. I say this without hesitation: we should unconditionally support Frans Timmermans and the Commission in their work to defend and protect European values. Free and fair countries, free trade and responsible

government make this region a better place, a more prosperous place.

Your Excellencies,

I mentioned Hugo Grotius earlier. As you know, my country was one of the founding members of the European Union.

Or the European *Economic* Community, as it was called back then. As a small but *open* country – a trading nation – we had a lot to gain. Opening our borders for trade.

Exporting our products. Importing services and products from others. Research shows that the single market has boosted the prosperity of the Dutch people by eight per cent. That's an extra month's salary per person – every year. In other words, the Union has been a true engine for growth, prosperity and stability.

This also means we have a lot to lose, if we should one day retreat behind our dikes.

Of course, the EU is about much more. The way we handle migration really is an issue in the hearts and minds of our citizens. We can tackle this problem by acting responsibly and showing solidarity. That should include dividing the number of people fleeing violent conflict and chaos equally among the member states. And it means that those who have no right to remain must return.

Migration is just one of many challenges that the 28 individual member states cannot solve alone.

If we want to tackle the world's many challenges, protect the values we hold dear and make our economies stronger, we need to work together. We need to adapt our Union to these times and make it fit for the future. This is only logical: as the world changes, so we need to adapt our structures.

So how, in closing, can we achieve that? Here are three ideas:

- 1) Politicians should be much clearer about what Europe is.

And what it is not. It is not, nor will it ever be, a

federation. But at the same time it is so much more than

merely a system of multilateral cooperation. It is something unique. Not just a market, or a coin, but a community of values. Values that previous generations fought hard for.

2) We should listen carefully to the reasons why, over the last couple of years, sections of our populations have slammed on the emergency brakes.

In recent decades, Europe has deepened and broadened its cooperation. This was often necessary and useful. Yet many people felt that decisions were being taken without them. I see the renewed focus on European issues as a positive thing. An opportunity for us all to communicate better about the benefits of European integration.

We have to get better at explaining this. Because without public support, our project is doomed to fail.

3) Then there is the economy. For a long time, Europe was synonymous with prosperity and growth. Is it still? For all of us? Today, in this age of globalization, we need a Europe that performs, protects, and provides jobs for its people. A Europe that is relevant to its people. A Europe where governments have their financial house in order,

and invest in green infrastructure and employment. A Europe with strong member states that stick to the rules, supported by well-functioning Brussels institutions. A Europe where the Treaty, and the directives and regulations arising from it, apply to all – in equal measure.

A Europe with a single currency that rests on the solid economic and financial foundations of the individual member states, and not on permanent transfers and more debt generation. A Europe, finally, which is again synonymous with prosperity and growth.

Your Excellencies,

I am new to this fantastic job. My civil servants tell me you will all head back to your embassies and report to your capitals on what this new guy Halbe Zijlstra had to say. Well, in essence

my message is simple. I am a geopolitical realist. A realistic foreign policy looks at what is achievable rather than what is desirable.

So let us build on what we've achieved. Let us stick together. And let us *work* together to make Europe stronger and better. It's in the interest of us all. All our nations, and all our people.

Thank you.