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**Speech by President Herman Van Rompuy upon receiving the
International Charlemagne Prize, Aachen, 29 May 2014**

Extracts

"How is it possible that people now see Europe as a reason they feel powerless and without a say – whereas it was precisely conceived to make them stronger and regain a grip on their own history?

"In response to this feeling, some call for 'more' Europe and some for 'less' – some even want a bit of both, depending on the issue. Hence perhaps the mix of reluctance and expectation, also at work in last week's European elections.

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"But we've never really thought of Europe as a home, a shelter, and today we pay a price for it. Europe, the great 'opener' of opportunities is now perceived by many as an unwelcome 'intruder', the friend of freedom and space is seen as a threat to protection and place.

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Full text below

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(...) I feel very honoured.

I should like to thank Mr Linden and the Board of Directors for this great award. I am also grateful to Mayor Philipp for his kind words, and to the citizens of Aachen for their reception here in their town hall.

Charlemagne's castle once stood where we are now...

Whenever I visit this place, I am overwhelmed by the thought of those twelve hundred years of unbroken history. But never as moved as today.

Because of its heritage, the city of Aachen has a great awareness of history ... History, not as the stultifying shadow of the past, but as a constant challenge, that we ourselves are responsible for building our future.

And so you founded the Charlemagne Prize in 1949. When our countries lay in ruins, the city of Aachen, as an imperial city and frontier town, was able to see beyond the limits of nation-states.

You dared to proclaim a new beginning: 'Europe'.

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And who could better symbolise Franco-German reconciliation than *Charlemagne* ? The *pater Europae* was the last to govern over Franks and Germans as one nation – before the continent was divided into three by his grandsons, in Verdun in 843. What followed was endless centuries of violence, all the way to the horrendous battle in that same Verdun, in 1916 (and beyond)...

In a way, European unification was nothing but undoing the initial Treaty of Verdun! But unlike in Carolingian days, this time not by force but by choice.

After the wars, for many in West Germany and many elsewhere, 'Europe' was a way to again write their own history. In the words of the founder of the Charlemagne Prize, Dr. Kurt Pfeiffer, nothing was more urgent than to fight the notion *"that nothing can be done to stem the tide of history and that any attempt is doomed to failure from the outset."*

Perhaps our present time is another such moment – where we must fight the idea of powerlessness in the face of history. I will come back to that.

Before I continue, let me salute the winners of the Charlemagne prize who have returned to Aachen for this occasion. Their extraordinary European lives, and those of their predecessors, tell the story of our continent's implausible post-war unification.

It so happens that I was working for the great Belgian Prime Minister Leo Tindemans when he received the Charlemagne Prize. I was twenty-eight at the time, and the emotion, the excitement even, that surrounded the announcement have stayed with me ever since. Tindemans had just penned his 1975 report on Europe. He was a firm believer in the generosity of the European idea, *'a noble idea'*, and my political mentor, also in this.

Today, my thoughts go also to two of my other predecessors as Belgian Prime Ministers, Jean-Luc Dehaene and Wilfried Martens. Both passed away this past year. They too, saw European unity as the greatest undertaking of our time, and dedicated their lives to it. I salute their memory.

This prize goes beyond me personally. I see it as a recognition of the courageous work of European leaders and all European institutions to combat the existential threat of the financial crisis.

As Angela Merkel, another winner of the prize, once said: "if the euro fails, then Europe fails".

It was the worst ever threat to Europe's unity, and together we have overcome it. We have won the battle.

As European Council President, I considered it from the very start my responsibility to act as the guardian of trust among the leaders. Trust is the basis for difficult decisions, an invaluable asset when you need to reach decisions at twenty-eight. However fragile it may have seemed at times from the outside, the sense of duty never wavered around the leaders' table. All fought to preserve the single currency, with solidarity, with responsibility.

During these trying moments (perhaps because of them), the European Council played its role to the full. Not meddling in the Union's day-to-day work, but springing into action when required: to set priorities, cut knots, deal with crises.

As the institution's first permanent president, I should like to thank all the people serving the institution in all possible positions , for their work: they too have helped shape this new office.

The European Council and its regular summits make very visible that the Union is not just Brussels, but twenty eight nations, intensely working together. And that what happens in every single one of these countries – economically, socially, politically – matters hugely to the others. Such is the reality of our interdependence today.

For people across Europe, these years of shared toiling have made it clear: *European policy is domestic policy*.

It is a new phase in our long journey.

As the European Union stands on the eve of political renewal, it is important to look ahead. From economic shocks to demographic shifts and climate trends – in a hypercompetitive world, we must concentrate on the right priorities. The list stands clearly before us: jobs and recovery, deepening the monetary union, climate and energy, freedoms and security, Europe's action in the world. But I will not elaborate on these themes; there are other places for that.

In the moments we have together, I want to address another important issue: the way people experience and relate to the European Union. At a time of public doubt, it is perhaps a deeper challenge.

We just heard three powerful reminders of Europe's promise – peace and democracy, prosperity and solidarity, a civilised and sovereign life as a nation.

I want to warmly thank the Prime Ministers of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine for accepting the invitation to come to Aachen – at such a tumultuous time for their region –, and I salute their courage, your courage.

The situation for your countries is on all our minds. Destabilisation by our common neighbour Russia is unacceptable, and all the more regrettable since, at heart, this great country fully belongs to the European civilisation, to European culture. Without Shakespeare or Balzac, there would be no Dostoyevsky as we know him, without Gogol, no Kafka, without Tolstoy, no Thomas Mann.

For the countries of the European Union, there is no nostalgia for a 'glorious' past that will never return, no border ambitions at the expense of neighbours, no cycles of defeat and revenge – all Member States have now turned that page and look with confidence to the future.

Today you have spoken of what Europe means to you, to your countries. To everyone in this room, as to me, your strong words were a precious reminder, a valuable gift.

Multumesc, Mahd-lobt. Dyakuyu. Thank you!

Isn't it striking that the European Union seems somehow more popular today outside its borders than within?

More and more, we see how the very opportunities and liberties that we Europeans hold, and that others are striving for, are being called into question.

This indeed is the crucial challenge: the way people perceive and relate to the Union.

How is it possible that people now see Europe as a reason they feel powerless and without a say – whereas it was precisely conceived to make them stronger and regain a grip on their own history?

In response to this feeling, some call for 'more' Europe and some for 'less' – some even want a bit of both, depending on the issue. Hence perhaps the mix of reluctance and expectation, a mix that was also at work in last week's European elections.

These are vast questions of course. But I would like in particular to make one underestimated point.

It is about the way our Union is above all experienced by people as a space and hardly ever as a place. Let me explain. Space and place are really not the same thing.

A place – *ein Ort* – brings protection, stability and belonging. It is *ein Heim*, where people feel at home. A space on the other hand – *ein Raum* – opens up movement and possibilities. It is about direction, speed and time.

As human beings, we need both. A space in which to fly, and a nest we can call ours. We are very simple creatures!

With Europe, the focus has always been on space. Think about it.

From the very start, the typical action was to remove borders, for goods, workers, investment, to let people and companies move, take initiatives, seize opportunities. Even today – in fields as diverse as energy, telecoms or the digital economy – it is still about bringing down borders, creating this big common space.

But we've never really thought of Europe as a home, a shelter, and today we pay a price for it. For decades it worked well. The open borders brought huge opportunities, for working, trading, studying abroad. And the impact of all the opening was mostly cushioned – by economic growth, and by the welfare states, set up in parallel.

For instance in my own region, Flanders, in the thirteen years between my entering high school and my leaving university, prosperity doubled. Poland, to take another example, which was as rich per capita as Ukraine when the Iron Curtain fell, is now at least three times richer.

Crucially, the division of labour through all these years was that Europe opened, and national governments protected. Nobody expected otherwise.

But things have changed. Globalisation has put the welfare states under strain. The crisis forced European Union institutions into a new role.

The result is a dramatic and rapid shift: whereas for decades Europe had been all about opening, liberating, unlocking, emancipating, empowering... today it is suddenly seen as meddling, judging, prescribing, dictating, correcting, even punishing... Europe, the great 'opener' of opportunities is now perceived by many as an unwelcome 'intruder', the friend of freedom and space is seen as threat to protection and place. We need to get the balance right. It is essential for the Union to be also on the protecting side.

It is urgent for the Union not to be seen as only benefiting businesses, but also employees; not only the "movers", but also the "stayers"; not only those with diplomas and language skills, but all citizens; and people not only as consumers, who like cheap products and a wide choice, but also as workers, who can see in others, competitors for their jobs.

How to get this balance right? When it comes to protection, people expect two things from the European Union.

First, for problems that individual countries are clearly not big enough to fight on their own, that the Union steps in. Second, where national authorities are best-placed to provide care, that the Union does *not* get in the way.

Where people *really* want Europe to defend their interests and keep threats at bay, is on global and cross-border issues.

Like reckless financial speculation, which is why we are building a banking union and closing the net on international tax evasion. Or threats like Internet abuse, social dumping, gas oligarchs – all issues where Europe stands its ground, and is stepping up its efforts.

Protecting does not mean retreating behind our borders. It does not mean commercial protectionism either. Part of it is precisely working with other countries abroad, to solve problems – like instability, lawlessness, or illegal immigration. This is Europe at work as a protector – on issues where its size makes a real difference. Scale matters. But there are other cases, where precisely *because* of its scale, the Union must tread softly.

Not disrupt, but respect familiar places of protection and belonging – from national welfare choices, to regional traditions and identities, all the way down to local cheese.

Knowing when to act as a Union, and when not to, is a difficult balance. It must be the outcome of a conversation, since preserving that balance is a collective work. People expect sensible rules, fairly applied, and a fight against abuses.

And to me, overall, the citizen's message to the Union *IS* clear: be stronger outside, be more caring inside.

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To be stronger outside, be more careful within: this is the common task ahead for all institutions and all governments.

It will not be easy, but it is important: People must feel at home in our Union. To ensure that Europe is not only this great area of movement and freedoms, ein Raum, but also a place of belonging, ein Ort, der Heimat ist.

I am convinced we can do it.

In 2014, when we think of the terrible events that took place a hundred years ago, we are reminded: It all stands and falls with peace. Without peace, nobody will make his fortune or find a home!

But feeling at home in the Union will also require a sense of that little extra, that *supplément d'âme* which characterises Europe. Beyond striving for peace, prosperity or power, it is also about culture, identity, destiny...

When I was sixteen years old, I remember reading a definition of culture quoted in an essay by Paul-Henri Spaak who incidentally, with Tindemans, until today was the other Belgian Charlemagne prizewinner: "*Culture*" – he said – "*is what remains, once you have forgotten all the rest.*" Once you reach the core. That hard core of European civilisation – you will find it anywhere on our continent.

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But Europe is also a certain idea of "*der Mensch*", or the person. As Arthur Koestler wrote: a person is infinitely more than one million divided by one million. Each person counts. This is the core value of our great civilisation, worthy of protection; this is Europe's message to the world.

Thank you! Thank you very much.
