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Speech of the Belgian Prime Minister Guy VERHOFSTADT to the ELDR congress
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Dear Friends, Over the past five years, we liberals have made a difference in Europe. Liberals are serving as President of the European Commission and President of the European Parliament. We have four prime ministers, in Denmark, in Finland, in Slovenia and in Belgium. We have 53 members in the European Parliament. It is no coincidence that during these past five years, Europe has made significant progress. With liberals in key positions, we saw the advent of the declaration of Laeken, the Convention and a European Constitution, which we believe will be approved in June. This is a liberal achievement, since the constitution guarantees both greater involvement of the citizen and the European Parliament and greater transparency. The constitution guarantees greater liberal democracy. But that is not all. With liberals in key positions, we have seen the advent of a common European defence. Europe used to stand on the sidelines when conflicts erupted, even on our own European continent, as happened with the war in the former Yugoslavia. Now, Europe can finally begin to play the international role that is rightfully hers. Europe now has a voice. After all, as Karl Popper always said, peace without an army is an illusion. And last but not least, the process of European enlargement, which will become official the day after tomorrow, has been carried through under the watchful guidance of liberals. As Europeans, democrats and liberals, we should be proud of enlargement. We should be proud that two days from now the Iron Curtain will be a thing of the past, an item for the history books. We should be proud that these European countries have become liberal democracies. However, you and I cannot help but notice that not everyone feels this same pride. We again see the traditional fears about enlargement. Unfortunately, we even see it party manifestoes. The fear of delocalisation of our companies. The fear of uncontrollable immigration. The fear of rising criminality. These fears are maybe understandable. But they are totally unfounded. Our companies will indeed establish themselves in the new member states. But that will create new jobs, both at home and in those countries. It won't destroy any jobs. Furthermore, the new member states will know rapid economic growth and development, becoming attractive again for their own population. They will develop from emigration countries into immigration countries. And finally, criminal gangs did not wait until 1 May of this year to come to the current member states. But we did not wait either for 1 May to tackle them. And we are getting more and more successful at it. Previous enlargements have proven all this. And I am convinced that we will witness the same developments now. Our liberal message to the new member states is loud and clear, after sixty years of separation: Welcome home! Dear Friends, These are historic times. A new constitution. Ten new member states. A new beginning for the European Union. What then are the challenges for the future, for the next five years? I see three major challenges: firstly, we must make Europe economically competitive; secondly, we must develop the EU's international role; and thirdly, we must guarantee security in Europe. The first challenge is to forge a coherent economic policy. The Lisbon Council has set the objective for the EU to become the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. In order to achieve this goal, we must review the Lisbon method. This method currently consists of comparing the European economies to each other. But is this the right way ahead? Instead of comparing us with ourselves, should we not compare our economies with the main world economies? The United States? China? Japan? India? These economies are growing much faster than the EU economies. Now, how can we improve our economic achievements? Firstly, by completing the single market, also in services, without however blindly harmonising everything. Secondly, by coupling the Stability Pact with a Flexibility Pact, which must make our economies more flexible and competitive. Thirdly, by putting an end to excessive and irritating administrative red tape. Fourthly, by investing more in research and development.

And finally, by lowering our wage costs. These are indeed liberal proposals. But more importantly, these are the only proposals that can again make our European economy competitive. Let me return to the Stability Pact for a moment. We must have the courage to admit that, although the objectives are still very good, the method should be improved. We have all seen in the past few months how a number of countries were denounced in public. This is the kind of spectacle that must be avoided in the future. No one benefits from it. Would it not be better if we made the method used for the Stability Pact more flexible, albeit without changing its objective? Should we not allow a Member State, which sees that it is facing difficulties, to work with the European Commission and draw up a timetable clearly detailing which measures will be taken so that it can get out of trouble? This method would not harm the Stability Pact. On the contrary, it would strengthen it and prevent a lot of unnecessary arguments.

Chers Amis, Un deuxième défi concerne certainement la défense européenne et la politique étrangère commune. L'émancipation de l'Europe, soixante ans après sa libération par les États-Unis, est à la fois inévitable et souhaitable. Lors des guerres du Balkan, nous avons assisté à la création de camps de concentration sur le continent européen, à mille kilomètres à peine de Bruxelles. Une fois de plus, il fallut attendre que les Américains mettent fin à une guerre européenne. Au mois de décembre de l'année passée, nous avons décidé de créer un pilier de défense européen propre. Avec son agence d'armement. Avec sa clause de solidarité. Avec ses coopérations structurées. Avec sa cellule de planification et de gestion des opérations européennes autonomes. En outre, la Constitution prévoit un Ministre européen des Affaires étrangères qui sera dans à la fois vice-président de la Commission européenne et président du Conseil des Affaires étrangères. Il importe maintenant, dans les années à venir, d'élaborer de façon concrète la défense européenne ainsi que la politique étrangère commune. Ainsi, nous doterons l'Europe de sa propre voix sur la scène internationale. Ce n'est pas seulement une question de politique, c'est avant tout une question d'éthique. La sécurité de nos citoyens constitue le troisième défi qui s'impose à nous. Pour les libéraux, la sécurité constitue l'une des missions essentielles de l'Etat et des autorités. Mais les attentats du 11 septembre et du 11 mars ont démontré que les réponses nationales ne suffisent plus. Nous devons agir à l'échelle européenne. Par le passé, nous avons déjà consenti des efforts. Au moment des attentats du 11 septembre 2001, la Belgique assumait la présidence de l'Union européenne. A l'époque, lors d'un Conseil européen extraordinaire, nous avons approuvé un plan d'action de lutte contre le terrorisme. Le moment est venu d'accélérer dans tous les États membres de l'Union européenne la mise en oeuvre de ce plan, notamment le mandat d'arrêt européen. Il y a cinq ans, à Tampere, nous avons approuvé tout un paquet de mesures concrètes intensifiant la coopération policière et judiciaire. Aujourd'hui, presque toutes ces mesures ont été exécutées. Mais depuis lors, le monde n'a cessé d'évoluer. Il en va de même pour la criminalité et le terrorisme. Il y a donc suffisamment de raisons pour que, cinq ans après Tampere, nous nous attelions à un Tampere bis. La violence criminelle n'est d'ailleurs pas seulement une source de souffrance humaine innombrable. Elle disloque en outre la société et constitue une menace pour notre démocratie. En tant que libéraux, nous ne pourrions jamais l'accepter.

Chers Amis, Dear friends, The challenges are huge. In order to achieve these goals, we need experts. Who then are these experts? Let me tell you. We liberals are the experts Europe needs. Because of our conviction. Because of our method. Our conviction is that we must go on with our reforms. We are passionate reforms. But we are also passionate European reformers. And our method is proven to be successful, it is our liberal democracy. Let me say one more thing about this. We liberals should take the initiative is to bolster the power of the European Parliament. Today, the European Parliament merely plays an advisory role in approving the European Constitutional Treaty. I believe that we liberals must advocate giving the European Parliament the power to approve or reject all future amendments. This would not only increase the power of the European Parliament. It would also transform the Constitutional Treaty into a real European Constitution.

Dear friends, I would like to conclude by talking about the findings of a recent study. A study carried out by the London School of Economics forecasting the composition of the next European Parliament and therefore the outcome of the elections. In this study, the scientists predict that of all parties the Liberal Group will make the biggest progress in the next European elections. These scientists predict that we are going to win 20 additional seats in Parliament, going from 53 to 73. This study predicts

something that we have all sensed for a much longer time: liberalism is on the rise in Europe. Liberalism is winning today. We still have six weeks to campaign. Six weeks to take to the streets. Six weeks to show the people that we liberals are the only ones who truly want to move forward with Europe. I wish you success.