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Toespraak Eerste Minister Alexander De Croo bij viering 70 jaar Europees Parlement

Zeventig jaar geleden vond in Straatsburg de eerste zitting van de Gemeenschappelijke Vergadering van de Europese Gemeenschap voor Kolen en Staal plaats, het begin van het Europees Parlement. Tijdens een speciale ceremonie wordt deze verjaardag vandaag gevierd in Straatsburg. Eerste Minister Alexander De Croo nam voor ons land het woord en stond stil bij zeventig jaar democratie in actie.

Madam president,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's Europe is not necessarily pushed forward by visionary leaders like the ones we know from our history books: Schuman, Spinelli, Spaak.

Today, Europe's political project is mainly driven by visionary citizens. By the people of Europe.

That is not abnormal.

We no longer live in the 1950s.

People are more empowered today.

More demanding towards those who are in positions of leadership.

That is of course a healthy evolution.

Because free and autonomous citizens, together with a free and independent press, are the core of our democracy;

they guarantee strong democratic accountability.

We have felt that public pressure during the COVID crisis.

While politicians tended to point out that, from an institutional point of view, health care was a national competency. And vaccines none of Europe's business: it was public opinion, it were the people of Europe who paved the way for a European response to the pandemic. As President von der Leyen coined it very candidly: "This is Europe's moment".

We now see the same thing happening in the energy crisis. Europeans see that the energy markets are international, not national. That energy prices are being used as a geopolitical weapon. That individual member states hit the limits of what they can do on their own, but that Europe should not be impotent.

That our sovereignty - our ability to act - is not only on the national level but also on the European level. An insight not new to European citizens. Already before the energy crisis broke out, in 2019, 90% of Europeans thought it was also Europe's task to guarantee the security of energy supply and to keep energy prices under control.

This House probably captures best the impatience of the people. Because you know from experience what it is to fight long and hard for your rightful place in the Union.

The EP has always been the 'first institution' in the formal sense - first in the Treaties and first in protocol. But for a long time, it was not first in policy-making.

In the words of professor David Farrell: « For much of its life the European parliament could have been labeled as 'a multilingual talking shop'. Today, it is one of the most powerful legislators in the world”.

It is important to celebrate the milestones of this Parliament together:

- Founded in 1952
- The first direct elections in 1979
- The Treaties of Maastricht in 1992 and of Lisbon in 2009 that made Parliament a fully-fledged co-legislator. Together with the Council.

We can be proud as Europeans of the road we have traveled together.

Mesdames et Messieurs, Madame la Présidente,

Cela étant dit, le travail est loin d'être terminé. La démocratie est une œuvre sans cesse inachevée.

Si l'on veut réellement renforcer notre démocratie, il faut aussi s'attacher à renforcer le Parlement européen.

Tous les défis majeurs, que cela soit la guerre en Ukraine, les flux migratoires, les prix de l'énergie, tous ces défis se jouent au niveau international, nous devons donc renforcer notre démocratie à ce même niveau international. À notre niveau européen.

Car le monde change et nous devons changer avec lui.

Nous le disons souvent au public, à nos électeurs - « il est temps de changer » - mais peut-être devrions-nous plus souvent nous le dire à nous-mêmes.

De nombreux pays aux frontières orientales de l'Europe - dans les Balkans occidentaux mais aussi en Ukraine et en Moldavie - conçoivent leur avenir dans notre famille. Et cette nouvelle réalité devrait nous pousser à repenser nos repères. Elle nous force à adapter nos rouages politiques, à franchir de nouvelles

étapes dans la démocratie européenne. Pour avoir, dans les années et les décennies à venir, une action plus décisive. Pour être mieux armés pour protéger les intérêts européens dans le monde.

La Conférence sur l'avenir de l'Europe nous a fourni une excellente base de discussion sur les changements dont nous avons besoin. À nous à présent de passer du débat à l'action et d'avoir un impact positif sur la vie de nos citoyens.

Nous comptons sur cette Assemblée pour continuer à jouer ce rôle.

Pour continuer à relier « Bruxelles » et « les citoyens européens ».

Quelle que soit la voie que nous choisirons, le Parlement européen fera inmanquablement un nouveau bond en avant en devenant véritablement la « première institution » de l'Europe.

Madam president,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am optimistic about our future.

Our European democracy is far from perfect.

It needs continuous improvement.

But it is not the delicate plant we thought it to be the past couple of years.

Our democracy is more resilient than we sometimes think.

Amidst the rise of autocratic tendencies of which Putin's illegal war in Ukraine as the most painful expression, sparkles of hope are accumulating. Here in Europe with an unseen unity in the face of unseen adversity. It shows that we are capable of taking care of our European democracy and developing it further.

In that same spirit: I would like to honor the fundamental work this Parliament has done in protecting democracy and the rule of law in Europe. We cannot leave this fight for fundamental rights to Courts only. We politicians have to do the heavy lifting as well.

As a member the European Council, I applaud persistence of this parliament and the frontrunner role it has played. We need you to continue to be that vigilant watchdog.

Still much more has to be done together with you: from the European green deal, to energy security and

transition to migration reform. We still have 18 months left before the end of the mandate. The Belgian Council presidency in the beginning of 2024 will stand ready to engage with you to successfully close the chapter of this legislature.

You are a key partner to us.

Day-in day-out.

You are part and parcel of our European fabric and of my country's fabric.

I would like to say simply "thank you" to the Parliament and its leadership - with a special mention of the late President Sassoli. Thank you for the solidarity it has shown with the people of Brussels during the Covid crisis and the Ukraine refugee crisis. You have provided the capital of Belgium and of Europe with tangible support in difficult times and we will never forget.

Madam president,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me finish by saying this House represents the catharsis of a long history of violence between European nations. This parliament represents the victory of humanity over nationalism.

It represents the best in us, Europeans.

It is the Parliament of parliaments.

We look forward to a year of celebrations with the European citizens and for the European citizens.

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