

Vice-Eersteminister en  
Minister van Werk, Economie en Consumenten,  
Belast met Buitenlandse Handel



Vice-Premier Ministre et  
Ministre de l'Emploi, de l'Economie et des  
Consommateurs, Chargé du Commerce Extérieur

TOESPRAAK DOOR KRIS PEETERS  
VICE-EERSTE MINISTER EN  
MINISTER VAN WERK, ECONOMIE, CONSUMENTENZAKEN,  
BELAST MET BUITENLANDSE HANDEL

Toespraak 40 jaar Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

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Mr. Chairman of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

*"We all live under the same sky, but we don't all have the same horizon."*  
Chancellor Adenauer spoke these words as a first-hand witness of a war that left Europe bitterly divided. A war that devastated our continent and killed millions of fellow Europeans.

Today, this seems a very distant past. We have all but forgotten that it is our European Union that has made war in Europe a thing of the past instead of a fear for the future. Peace in Europe has not been the result of militarization, but the result of shared institutions and a shared destiny.

At a time when populists love to blame the EU for everything that goes wrong in our societies, we should not forget that we share that same sky.

Far too often, in discussions in Council and Parliament, we tend to focus on the issues that divide us, while we should focus on the core values that unite us.

The very same values that built the European Union. Because the truth is that Europe wasn't built by soulless bureaucrats, it was built by people, statesmen, like Adenauer, Schuman, Martens and Tindemans. Christian-democrats, in the true sense of the word.

Of course, in a political party as large as the EPP, there will be differences of view. Remember, we don't all have the same horizon. And that's a good thing, because debate is meant to bring people and views closer. When the debate stops and the slogans take over, is when we enter in troubled waters.

This is why we should never give in to the logic of populists, the logic of Us versus Them, the logic of alienation and dehumanization, the logic of divisiveness.

Electoral success is important, but not at the cost of our fundamental values. Solidarity, generosity, openness.

It is because of our enduring support for those values that the EPP has managed to be the leading voice in EU politics and policy for many decades. This is what drove Adenauer and Spaak and Martens and Van Rompuy. This is how the EPP led the pact in creating a strong EU.

We should be proud of that strong European Union. Because it is to the benefit of every European. Not despite but because of its large scale.

In a world dominated by a few big blocks, even countries like Germany and France are small players. This is why the European Union, representing 25% of the global economy, should speak with one voice on the global stage. It is the only way to defend our interests. Only in the Bible David triumphs over Goliath.

If President Trump has refrained from imposing further tariffs on the EU after his meeting with President Juncker in July, it is because the EU is taken seriously as a large trading bloc. I am sure the current US President would much rather negotiate directly and separately with Belgium or Italy or Hungary.

So, is this a plea for that infamous European superstate? No, of course it isn't.

Our citizens aren't interested in institutional ideologies that all too often dominate the debate on Europe. They don't care about the colour of the cat, as long it catches mice.

So what mice should Europe catch?

Allow me to focus on three issues where I think the EU can and should make a big difference for its citizens.

**First**, we need to work on a social Europe.

Europe is more than a market. So, it is only natural that when we deepen our internal market, we also provide the same quality of social protection. That we ensure fair rules and that we protect against social dumping.

It is not a question of imposing a specific social model on all EU countries, but rather of looking for stronger convergence, making our internal market fairer and more sustainable.

For example, the reform of the posting of workers directive by Commissioner Marianne Thyssen, was a major breakthrough. But now we must also strengthen the cooperation between national labor authorities. Commissioner Thyssen launched the proposal to create a European Labour Authority to make sure the new rules are effectively applied. I call on the Presidency to strive towards a general approach at the December Epsco council to make sure we can launch this new institution before the European elections.

In general, it is my strong conviction that we should not only focus on budgetary discipline, but also on social convergence. The pillar of social rights is a step forward and it should be an integral part of the European Semester.

But why not also make these social parameters hard conditions? Like the 3% threshold for budgetary deficits that makes sure everyone is in the same

ballgame, we could define certain social thresholds that every member of the EU or the Eurozone should respect.

**The second issue** I would like to touch upon, and by far the most sensitive at the moment, is migration. It is on top of everybody's mind. It is an issue that moves public opinion, although it is often abused by populists to advance their agenda on identity.

Now, let's get our facts straight. At its peak in 2015, we saw 1.8 million illegal border crossings in the EU. In the first 8 months of 2018, that number was down to 91.000. 91.000! If this trend line holds on for the rest of the year, it means that there is a 92% reduction in illegal border crossings in 3 years' time.

So yes, there is an issue and we should focus on a better control of our external borders, but let's not make the problem bigger than it is.

What we do need, are structural measures so we are ready if a new peak emerges. We must boost our cooperation with African countries, through the *New Alliance for Sustainable Investments and Jobs* that President Juncker presented. This alliance could help to create up to 10 million jobs in Africa in the next 5 years.

We must also strengthen our borders. I welcome President Juncker's proposal to increase the number of EU border guards to 10.000 and my party is open to discussing the possibility of hotspots in the EU and in North Africa. But always with respect for international law. Always with respect for human dignity.

Finally, we will always need a degree of solidarity between member states. We cannot leave the burden of migration inflows to a handful of member states. It is crucial that we continue to work on the revision of the Dublin regulation and reach a political agreement before the European elections of next year.

**The third and final issue** we need to talk about, is Brexit. We are at a critical juncture. Progress has been made and I would like to commend Michel Barnier on his excellent negotiation track so far. Belgium stands behind the Commission 100%. But key issues remain, most notably the Irish question and the nature of our future relationship.

For Belgium, a country that has 50 billion euros worth of bilateral trade with the UK, it is vital that we find an agreement on a smooth and open trading relationship in the future.

A High Level Brexit Group, composed of business federations and government institutions, is looking into the possible consequences of the Brexit for our economy. Only last week we launched an impact scan that helps small and medium-sized enterprises to determine the impact of a possible no-deal on their activities.

As minister of economy, I have welcomed the Chequers proposal as a step in the right direction. But, just as the EU has to be flexible, the UK will have to accept that Chequers will not be the landing zone on which we can compromise.

As much as reaching a deal with the UK is vital for my country's economy, preserving the European project and its internal market is even more essential. We want to reach a deal and as good Belgians we are willing to compromise, but not at the expense of the integrity of the single market and the indivisibility of the four freedoms that underpin it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you may expect from a Belgian, I am a deeply pragmatic man. So no, I don't believe we will ever find ourselves in a European demos that replaces national identity.

If nothing else, because our identity cannot be defined one-dimensionally. The notion that we cannot be Flemish if we want to be Belgian, or Belgian if we want to be European, is completely outdated. Today's reality is that we have a multilayered identity. We can feel Flemish, Belgian and European at the same

time. Because in all of those identities we find a common past and see a joint future.

That multilayered identity requires multilevel governance. European democracy coincides with national and local democracy.

This is the only way the European Union can strengthen its member states and this is the only way we can make sure that our great European project is more than the sum of its parts.

And this is only possible if national political parties and affiliated organizations continue to actively support and promote our European project. With a 40-year presence in the heart of the European Union, the *Konrad Adenauer Foundation* has been in the forefront of a stronger Europe. It is my hope that the Foundation will continue its greatly appreciated work, in Germany, in Brussels and throughout Europe and I want to congratulate you for the great work of the past 4 decades.

I thank you.