

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Thank you for this overwhelming show of confidence. Prior to today's election, most of you probably saw me simply as the chair of a political group, one other than your own, in the European Parliament. I am honoured by the trust which you have nevertheless seen fit to place in me today. I will do everything I can not to betray that trust and to give our Parliament a powerful voice. I intend to carry out the office of President of the European Parliament in such a way that those who voted for me today can take pride in having done so, and those who did not vote for me today are pleasantly surprised. I will be the President of all Members of the European Parliament and defend your rights!

I also owe a debt of gratitude to you, President Buzek. You were the first President of an EU institution to emerge from the independence movements in Eastern Europe. By virtue of that fact, you have come to symbolise the triumph of democracy.

As I take up this office today my overwhelming emotion is humility. These are turbulent times in the history of Europe. For many people in Europe, they are hard times. My parents belonged to a generation whose credo was 'we want our children to be better off than us'. And we are better off! However, we can no longer be sure that the same will be true of our own children. As a result of the economic crisis, in many countries poverty is on the increase and unemployment has reached disastrous levels among young people in particular. They are now taking to Europe's streets to protest against an economic system which allows a small minority to rake in the profits when times are good, and forces society as a whole to bear the losses when times are bad; a system whose workings might lead a dispassionate observer to conclude that anonymous ratings agencies in New York are more powerful than democratically elected governments and parliaments. This crisis of confidence in politics and its institutions is also undermining faith in the European integration process. More and more people are casting a suspicious eye on our work. They are not sure whether everything we do here is necessarily for the best. We must grasp the fact that people in Europe have little time for institutional debates because they are too busy worrying about their children's futures, their jobs, their pensions, about social justice in general. They want healthy food and a clean environment – we must pay greater heed to what they are saying!

After all, this Chamber is the place where the interests of the people are defended. The Members who sit in this Chamber are the representatives of ordinary Europeans. And so I say this: the people who elected us are looking to us to put their side of the argument. I know that all the Members of this House see themselves as the advocates of ordinary people. I am proud of that fact and I thank you all for your commitment to the citizens of Europe.

For the first time since it was founded, the failure of the European Union is a realistic possibility. For months now the Union has been stumbling from one crisis summit to another. Decisions which affect us all are being taken by heads of government behind closed doors. To my mind, this is a reversion to a form of

European politics which I thought had been consigned to the history books: it is reminiscent of the era of the Congress of Vienna in the 19th century, when Europe's leaders were ruthless in their defence of national interests and democratic scrutiny was simply unheard of.

In contrast, post-war Europe is founded on a sober acknowledgement of the fact that our interests can no longer be separated from those of our neighbours; on a shared understanding that the EU is not a zero-sum game, in which one person must lose so that another can win. The reverse is true: **either we all lose – or we all win. The fundamental basis for this is the Community method. It is not a technocratic concept, but the principle at the heart of everything the European Union stands for!**

What does this mean in practice? It means resolving disputes by means of dialogue and consensus; basing decisions on the principles of solidarity and democracy, and not simply deferring to the more powerful; reconciling the interests of the smaller and larger Member States, northern and southern Europe, eastern and western Europe; and placing the common good above individual interests.

The Community project, which was so successful for decades that we came to take it for granted, has been undermined. Over the last two years, not only have the problems changed, but the way in which problems are addressed has changed as well. **The plethora of summits, the growing fixation with meetings of the Heads of State and Government, is severely diminishing the part played by the only directly elected Community institution, the European Parliament, in decision-making processes.** The representatives of the peoples of Europe have essentially been reduced to the role of rubberstamping agreements reached between governments in backrooms in Brussels.

The public are responding to this lack of parliamentary legitimacy by viewing political decisions taken by their leaders as nothing more than a series of diktats from Brussels. The price is being paid by the EU as a whole, since this dissatisfaction with politics acts as a breeding ground for anti-European sentiment.

The European Parliament will not stand idly by and watch this process continue!

Here, today, I issue a challenge to anyone who claims that more Europe can be achieved with less parliamentarianism!

The intergovernmental agreement on a new fiscal union will be the first test. In the negotiations, the representatives of our Parliament initially failed to secure support for their call to combine budgetary discipline with measures to foster growth and employment. But it is just such a sensible compromise that the citizens of Europe want! For this reason as well, we must have a seat at the table at European summits.

Europe is a Community of values. We insist that applicant countries comply with the Copenhagen Criteria to the letter. The European Parliament's role must now be to ensure that the principle of democracy and basic rights and freedoms are respected and implemented as a matter of course in the Member States as well. **Whoever breaches the values enshrined in our Charter of Fundamental Rights must reckon with us as adversaries. That is our duty as Members of the European Parliament.**

I see my role as President of the European Parliament, as President of one of the three main EU institutions, as being one of countering this fixation with summits, this ongoing trend towards the renationalisation of policy-making. I want to help the European Parliament raise its profile as a forum for democracy and informed, partisan debate about the future political course of the European Union. **We must do everything we can to make sure that our words carry more weight.**

It is absolutely vital that we should be able to negotiate with the Council on an equal footing, whether those negotiations concern the Multiannual Financial Framework, the reform of agricultural, fisheries or regional policy, measures to combat climate change, financial market regulation, justice and home affairs or trade policy.

The Lisbon Treaty has now been in force for two years and we, as the representatives of the people, have been slow to exploit the scope it offers us. Our shared aim must be to exercise to the full the powers which have been conferred on us – even if the result is a political dispute. If our Parliament is to become more visible, if greater attention is to be paid to its views, a rethink on the issue of first-reading agreements is also essential.

For all this to work, we must also keep our own house in order. **With the help of our Administration, I intend to ensure that parliamentary bodies and Members are provided with all the support they need so that we can carry out our tasks as legislators to the full.**

I will not be an amenable President. I will be a President who, if necessary, fights to ensure that the executive shows Parliament the respect it deserves, who responds when the interests of European citizens are jeopardised. A President who represents strong MEPs determined to defend the interests of their constituents. A President who will do everything in his power to win back lost public trust in the European integration process and restore public enthusiasm for Europe!

Honourable Members,

Many people have risked their lives, and too many people have given their lives, in the cause of parliamentary rights and parliamentarianism. The first freely elected President of the constituent assembly in Tunisia, Mustapha Ben Jaffa, and his colleagues, who are now getting their first taste of parliamentary work, are looking to the parliaments of Europe and to the European Parliament as examples. In Libya, where a tyrant waged war against his own people, the EU was the first country or international organisation to open an embassy, giving people hope in a difficult situation. At the award ceremony for the Sakharov Prize, a courageous

young blogger and a heroic opponent of Gaddafi moved us with their wide-eyed admiration for European values. In the Middle East, the question so often put to us is how did Europe manage to turn enemies into friends, how did we overcome national, religious and philosophical differences and grow together as a united Europe. **The further away from Europe one travels, the better Europe's reputation becomes.**

Let us work together to ensure that Europeans themselves can once again share this enthusiasm for European integration!

Europe is a fascinating idea, an idea which took shape as a response by politicians in the second half of the 20th century to events in the first half. What ideas and images do we associate with the first half of the 20th century? Hatred, superpower politics, intolerance, contempt for human dignity, the First World War trenches and Stalin's Gulag. The gas chambers of Auschwitz as the lowest point in the history of civilisation. In the second half of the 20th century, the European unification process and the institutions created as part of that process have given Europe the longest period of peace and prosperity in its history. In 1989, the Iron Curtain fell. Germany was reunified. In 2004 and 2007, countries which had formerly belonged to the Warsaw Pact joined the EU and the cultural and political unity of our continent, which had been divided arbitrarily for 40 years, was restored. What a success story! Why can we no longer see that this is something to be proud of? Why do we allow people to belittle an achievement unique in history?

Ladies and gentlemen,

My grandfather fought in the First World War. Twenty years later, my father left home to fight in a war started by Hitler's criminal regime which left much of the world in flames. I grew up in a town close to the borders with two other countries where people were forced to queue for hours to visit their neighbours in Belgium and Holland.

We have overcome war and hunger. We have opened borders. We have proscribed racism and xenophobia. Today, we live in a free, in an open Europe. In a Europe which can be proud of its cultural diversity.

Let us now prepare that Europe for the 21st century, so that, for coming generations as well, it holds out the promise of an economically strong, socially just, free and democratic home for all Europeans.

Thank you for your attention.