

"Common sense, common Europe";, speech by President-elect Charles Michel at the University of Amsterdam



It is a pleasure to be back at the University of Amsterdam. I spent 6 months studying here as an Erasmus student.

I have many nice memories of this city. For example, when I arrived, I bought a used bike from someone on the street. You know what comes next: 2 weeks later, my bike was stolen. Then, a few weeks later, someone in the street offered to sell me a used bike and it was my bike! So I bought it, the same bike, twice. Today I'd like to make an announcement: if anybody has my old bike, I would like to buy it, a third time!

The Erasmus programme is a great European success story – almost 4 million students have participated. An impressive statistic. But there's another statistic I prefer. Around 1 million babies have been born to Erasmus couples. And who knows, maybe some of you will add to this statistic in the future!

Today I would like to speak about Europe, our common home. Imagine, for a moment, if Europe did not exist. Who would lead the fight against climate change? Who would defend our rights and freedoms? And more concretely, who would eliminate roaming charges across Europe? And who would ban single-use plastics? Europe does all these things, and much more.

Europe should be prouder and more self-confident about how we have improved people's daily lives.

Today, we are free to love who we want. Free to express our opinions without fear. Free to get justice in fair courts. Free to access independent media. Free to travel and live across borders. We should never take these freedoms for granted.

A few weeks ago we marked the fall of the Berlin Wall. A momentous occasion – for both Germany and Europe. It reminds us how far we have come from the old Cold War divisions. Today, democracies and free market economies stretch across our continent. This offers unprecedented opportunity to our citizens. That's why I ask myself: "Why all the pessimism today?" Just look at how much we have achieved since those dark days.

I have met young people here in Amsterdam, and all across Europe. You want to take your destiny into your own hands, and you are not alone.

Support for Europe is growing – the recent European elections showed that. Europeans came out in record numbers – especially young people – to make

their voices heard. Loud and clear. A positive sign for the future of Europe. Trust in the European Union is at a 10-year high.

But these elections also tell the complex story of Europe – the hopes, the fears, the dreams of our citizens from the four corners of our continent. Europe is a colourful patchwork of different identities, cultures, traditions and perspectives. And, yes, also with competing interests. I love that about Europe. For me, it is our uniqueness.

But it also makes Europe a challenging place to do politics, find compromise, and take action. I come from Belgium. A country with 6 governments, 7 parliaments, 3 national languages, and more than 1.000 beers. Across Europe, there are 8 political groups in the European Parliament, 24 official languages and 50.000 different beer brands. So, I should feel right at home in my new job. It certainly won't be boring!

We are a Union of 28 democracies, with open debates, political parties, and a free press, where we are able to have open discussions and disagreements.

For me, this is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength. As long as we are able to agree on the most important thing – to stand together, unified, for our common good.

And putting labels on people doesn't help either. When I speak to people across Europe, they don't say, "I'm an elite or I'm a populist." They say, "I care about my family. I care about my job. I care about my future". I believe we all want the same things. It is how we get there that matters. Young Europeans in particular are expressing their grand ambition for Europe, especially on climate change.

Europe needs more confident thinking. And we have reason to be confident. Because we speak from a position of strength – the economic power of 500 million consumers, representing 20% of the global GDP.

A Confident Global Leader

Today the world is changing at lightning speed. Your generation knows this better than anyone. Climate, digitalisation, and geopolitics are radically changing the way we live. This can create a feeling of anxiety. A questioning of the traditional bonds of family, community, and country.

But I believe it is how we respond to these changes that will define us and influence Europe's future. We need tolerance, openness, and mutual respect and certainly not a bunker mentality. Europe is built on the solid foundation of cooperation, fair trade, and the rules-based order. These are not empty words.

Fighting Climate Change

Today climate change is threatening our very existence. We must address it with laser focus. We must shift into high gear. We must lead. And inspire others to act.

The numbers speak for themselves:

- Over 90% of geo-physical disasters are climate-related
- These disasters have killed 1.3 million people between 1998 and 2017.
- The economic losses from climate-related disasters are hundreds of billions of euros.

This simply cannot continue. Only firm leadership will energise people to act.

I want Europe to be the first climate-neutral continent. To achieve this, we need to transform our economy and our society. And mobilise private and public investments. Climate change is not the end of the story. Human history shows that obstacles are often unique opportunities to make progress, innovation, new technologies, a better quality of life. This is what we need now. Urgently.

Bold climate action could trigger trillions of euros in economic benefits. And create millions of jobs in the sustainable energy sector alone. We must seize this opportunity. Europe will promote the Paris Agreement on climate change and your generation has taken to the streets to demand action for a healthy planet. We are all in the same boat. I share your urgency.

Building a Strong & Fair Economy

To be a strong leader, Europe needs a strong economy. But today our open economy is being questioned. Countries and companies are throwing out the rule book. Taking an unpredictable attitude to globalisation.

We must stand our ground, promote a level playing field, and take an integrated approach to the economy. A strong, healthy economy helps our societies flourish while driving down poverty and inequality.

We need to speed up economic reforms that clear the way for young innovators with game-changing ideas. But we need to do it the European way. With social fairness. With equal access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection.

A More Assertive Europe

Greater European unity will provide more stability, more security and more fairness for our citizens. Europe is at the forefront of global cooperation – a credible, respected, and valued partner at the international table. So we shouldn't be shy about promoting our interests and values more confidently. We must be at the table. Not aggressive, but more assertive. Self-confident, at the heart of today's core debates.

I believe we can be more assertive in 3 areas:

First, Trade. I am in favor of free trade and entrepreneurship. Europe needs to build a new generation of trade agreements around the world, based on transparency and high social and climate standards

The second way is to better support our digital and private sector companies. Europe must harness the vast potential of digitalization and move fast on break-through technologies. Just like you are doing here in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is home to one of the most vibrant start-up ecosystems in the world. In bio-tech, electric mobility, and healthcare, to name just a few. Last year alone, Dutch startups raised more than 500 million euros in investments. And Amsterdam was Europe's 4th biggest startup hub. We should increase our support for these kinds of startups. They are the lifeblood of tomorrow's economy.

Our digital strategy must be compatible with our European values. Today Big Data is on the digital agenda. It has evolved into a massive economic resource. But we must protect consumers' privacy and individual freedoms along the way. I firmly believe we can do both: compete with the global tech giants on innovation and build markets that are good for people, business, and society. Along these same lines, our tax policy should be fair and balanced too. Companies should contribute to the countries where they make their profits. In my view, this is common sense.

The third area where Europe can be more efficient is Defence and Security. We need to improve our defence capacity, if we want to influence global events. And protect our interests. Bolstering our joint defence capabilities and investing smarter is the way forward. A strong NATO and a strong European defence are complementary. With NATO and within NATO. More cooperation on security and defence will advance Europe's strategic autonomy in the long term.

Working Together

The best project in world is nothing without a good strategy. So we must remain united, never forget our past, and build our common future. Finding pragmatic, common sense solutions to our most pressing problems is the hard part.

I want to encourage an unshakeable unity between EU leaders and promote workable solutions, in a spirit of openness and dialogue. Confidence and common sense are the best tools to move forward. I want to build a foundation of trust with other leaders – and among people. The interests of all European countries are interlocking and part of the same bigger picture. We all want the same things for our families and countries: a healthy, prosperous, sustainable Europe.

But how we get there is open for debate. I won't hide behind bureaucratic jargon, institutional competition or mountains of red tape. I want a frank and honest conversation that leads to decisions and actions.

That's why I am here today. I want a conversation with everyone, not just heads of state or government. I want to understand your hopes, your dreams, even your fears for the future.

Please get involved. Don't stay on the sidelines. We need Europe's young generation. Your energy, your optimism, your talents, your fresh ideas.

Never underestimate your power to change the status quo. Get involved to innovate, to create. to step forward.

Little by little, day-by-day, together we can build a Europe of common values, based on common sense, that works for all of us.