

Speech by Angela Merkel, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on Wednesday, 17 January 2007

Mr President, Hans-Gerd Pöttering,
Mr President of the Commission, José Manuel Barroso,
Deputies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be speaking to you today for the first time as the President of the Council here in this European Parliament, a parliament which now has members from 27 countries. Allow me, therefore, once again to extend a warm welcome to the deputies from Romania and Bulgaria.

I would like once again to congratulate the President and Vice-President of the European Parliament, who were elected yesterday, on behalf of the whole Council, and express my hope that we will enjoy good, close, constructive and intensive cooperation, as we can expect from a Parliament which knows its own mind, as the President just said.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have spent my whole life in Europe. And yet I am still a relatively youngster in the European Union. That is because I grew up in the former German Democratic Republic, and only 17 years ago, after German reunification and the collapse of the socialist system, was I, together with many millions of others, accepted into the European Union. Consequently, until the age of 35 I only knew the European Union from the outside, and have only been an insider since 1990.

Almost everything in life looks slightly different from the inside than it does from the outside, as we well know. That goes for all houses, and it is also the case with Europe. From the outside, the European Union is a historic success story without precedent. The European Union is one of the most impressive works of peace on Planet Earth. European unification is a happy achievement for the people of Europe. It safeguards their freedom and paves the way for prosperity.

The Treaties of Rome will soon be 50 years old. We will be celebrating this anniversary on 24 and 25 March in Berlin, a city which epitomizes like no other the reunification of Europe following the end of the Cold War. But let's be honest. Fifty years is hardly more than the blinking of an eye in the context of history. Nonetheless, an incredible amount has been achieved in this short time!

That, then, is Europe as perceived from the outside.

Yet from the inside, too, the European Union is a wonderful house. In fact I find it even more beautiful from the inside than from the outside. That, at least, has been my personal experience in the last 17 years.

Ladies and gentlemen, I don't ever want to leave this house. I am convinced that there is no better place for us to live than in our shared European home!

We are now in the process of fitting it out. We are extending it. We are renovating parts of it. Sometimes I think we are so busy extending and renovating the building to allow almost half a billion Europeans to make their home there, that we could easily overlook its greatness and uniqueness in the midst of all the construction work. Then we are hardly able to see what is special about the building and what is at its heart.

Ladies and gentlemen, when you are at home, you will sense that this is the situation for many people in Europe today. They are asking themselves, "What should Europe be?"

"Why do we need Europe?" "What holds Europe together in its innermost being?" "What defines this European Union?"

Some believe that the attempt to define the essence of Europe is pointless. To be quite honest, I beg to differ. Let me remind you of Jacques Delors' famous appeal that we have "to give a soul to Europe".

Allow me to add my own thoughts – we have to find Europe's soul. For we do not really need to give a soul to Europe – it already has one.

Is this soul synonymous with diversity? Hardly anyone has expressed this more beautifully than the author Karel Čapek, a great European from Prague, who said, and I quote, "The Creator of Europe made her small and even split her up into little parts, so that our hearts could find joy not in size but in plurality."

Diversity? Undoubtedly it is correct to say that Europe thrives on its diversity. We want to preserve the differences between our nations, between the regions of Europe, the diversity of languages and mentalities. We cannot and will not harmonize everything which could be harmonized.

Yes indeed, Europe thrives on its diversity. Yet it is also true to say that diversity in itself cannot be the universal European principle which helps us to understand what holds Europe together in its innermost being, what defines its soul.

However, by acknowledging the diversity among nations and people we achieve something else. It leads us to the real question we have to answer.

The question is, "What makes Europe's diversity possible?" I believe the answer to this question is clear. Freedom is what makes our diversity possible. Freedom is the prerequisite for our diversity – freedom in all its manifestations: The freedom to express our opinions freely, even when others do not like them. The freedom to believe or not to believe. The freedom of enterprise. The freedom of artists to create their work as they see fit.

Europe needs this freedom just as much as we need air to breathe. Where it is restricted, we wither away.

It is vital that Europe remembers that freedom is not something which can be achieved once and for all. Freedom has to be won anew almost every day. And freedom does not stand alone. It is inextricably linked with responsibility.

When we speak of true freedom, therefore, we are actually always speaking of the freedom of others.

Or we can say in Voltaire's famous words, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

I think Voltaire carried the soul of Europe within himself. For Voltaire's words show that what characterizes Europe, what defines its soul is the way we approach our diversity.

Throughout our history we Europeans have learned to make the most of diversity. And the quality which enables us to do so, which enables us to enjoy freedom in responsibility for others, is a valuable asset.

That quality is tolerance. Europe's soul is tolerance. Europe is the continent of tolerance.

We have taken centuries to learn this. On the way to tolerance we had to endure cataclysms. We persecuted and destroyed one another. We ravaged our homeland. We jeopardized the things we revered.

Not even one generation has passed since the worst period of hate, devastation and destruction. That was perpetrated in the name of my people.

Our history over the centuries certainly gives us in Europe absolutely no right to look down on the people and regions of the world who have problems practising tolerance today.

Yet our history over the centuries obliges us in Europe to promote tolerance throughout Europe and across the globe and to help everyone practise it.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, tolerance is a demanding virtue. It requires the involvement of both heart and mind. It requires something of us. Yet in no way must it be confused with arbitrariness and sitting on the fence.

And what is more, tolerance, as we need it in Europe, does not mean merely refraining from violence, does not mean simply putting up with "otherness", but actively welcoming it.

There is a very simple way to reach Europe's soul, tolerance. We have to see things from the point of view of other people. Why don't you try it some time? It is an exciting adventure to discover the wealth of diversity on our continent through the eyes of the many peoples of Europe. However, our fascination must not make us forget the fact that tolerance is constantly being put to the test.

I therefore state quite clearly that Europe must never show the least understanding for intolerance, for violence perpetrated by right-wing or left-wing extremists, for violence in the name of a religion. Tolerance sounds its own death knell if it does not protect itself from intolerance. In the words of Thomas Mann, "Tolerance becomes a crime when applied to evil." Tolerance without acceptance of intolerance is what makes us humane.

In Lessing's famous ring parable, Nathan the Wise tells of an argument between three brothers about who is the true heir of their father's ring and hence of religious truth: The true heir is revealed through good deeds, and hence the brothers should outdo each other in doing them. Here, I believe, we encounter the soul of Europe once again – it calls us to strive for what is best through living peacefully with and being there for one another.

For me, and as a Christian I expressly acknowledge my allegiance to Europe's Christian principles, the most beautiful part of the play is what the Sultan asks of Nathan. Bridging all the divisions of faith, the Muslim requests the Jew to "Be my friend".

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, that is what we seek and for which we strive – harmony among nations. That was and also remains the greatest goal of European unity.

That was also the starting point for the initial steps taken in Europe after 1945. The Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, as well as the Treaties of Rome, dealt with our culture very little or not at all, and even in the Maastricht Treaty it plays only a marginal role.

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Yet without a vision for a common Europe, for that, therefore, which defines Europe's innermost being, without such a vision none of these treaties would have come to fruition. These treaties already touched on key questions concerning European interaction and answered them, sometimes in a wonderful way.

And on this basis I am therefore committed to a Europe in which all Member States, large and small, old and new, can participate equally, to embrace the tasks we face today. In Europe we can only succeed if we join forces, which is why the motto of our Presidency is "Europe –succeeding together". Allow me to add to that, Europe can only succeed together.

I am committed to a Europe which focuses on what can best be regulated at European level and then does so with the necessary dedication and effectiveness.

I am committed to a Europe which, on the other hand, consciously leaves to the Member States, their regions and municipalities those policy areas where a European solution would rather be a hindrance.

I am committed to a Europe which relies on European solutions where it wants and indeed has to act together in order to live up to the challenges of the 21st century – globalization, the threat posed by new dangers, such as terrorism, to peace and security.

Ultimately, I am convinced, we can only rise to these challenges on the basis of our understanding of tolerance.

The draft of the constitutional treaty is the first text of a European treaty which refers specifically to the tolerance which is the hallmark of the European Union Member States, and which enables us to build the foundations on which the Europe of the future can develop new, sensible regulations.

Regulations which reflect the new size of the European Union and the challenges it faces. Regulations which must give us scope to act. For we know that under the current regulations the EU can neither be enlarged, nor is it capable of taking the necessary decisions.

Ladies and gentlemen, we must overcome this situation. That is why we need clear definitions of the respective areas of competence of the EU and the nation states. Procedural rules must be spelled out more clearly than they have been to date. In other words, the treaties on which the Union is based must be adapted to the changed circumstances if the enlarged Union is to hold its own in tomorrow's world.

This is why I, on behalf of the European Council, will be consulting all Member States, the European Commission and Parliament on how we can resolve the ratification crisis surrounding the constitutional treaty.

The phase of reflection is over. Our task now is to prepare new decisions by June. I intend to strive to ensure that at the end of the German Presidency a road map setting the way forward for the constitutional treaty can be adopted.

It is in the interests of Europe, the Member States and its citizens, to bring this process to a successful conclusion by the next elections to the European Parliament in spring 2009. Not to do so would be an historical failure.

Let us rise to this challenge! And let us be guided in this by our approach to our diversity – by the spirit of tolerance – as we have been in previous historic decisions on Europe! After all, the political, economic and social challenges we face are indeed formidable and very tangible.

I believe we should set two priorities:

First, foreign and security-policy demands are being made on the European Union from all sides.

In Kosovo, the Union will support the implementation of a solution to the status issue. Stability in the Western Balkans is in our common interests. And I would add that without a European perspective for the states of the Western Balkans, this stability will not be achieved.

In the Middle East, the European Union has to drive forward the peace process in cooperation with the United States, the UN and Russia. In short, the so-called Middle East Quartet is called upon to act. The prerequisite for any progress, however, is a united EU stance to bring about peace, stability and sustainable development in the Middle East. This also applies to our policy towards Iran's nuclear programme.

Likewise, Europe has a fundamental interest in the successful development of Afghanistan. We know that only a combination of military and civilian efforts can succeed. Anything else will be a dead end.

The EU has to show a greater will to shape events in its neighbourhood, for we cannot always comply with the desire of many countries to join the EU. Neighbourhood policy is the sensible and attractive alternative. We intend to develop such a neighbourhood policy particularly towards the Black Sea region and Central Asia during our Presidency.

Moreover, we have to do everything in our power to ensure the success of the Doha Round. There is too much at stake for us, as well as for developing countries. We have little time at our disposal, but we are determined to do everything we can to succeed.

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However, ladies and gentlemen, we do not intend to stop there. At the EU-US Summit we want to discuss the intensification of the transatlantic economic partnership. The United States is the European Union's most important trading partner. We are each other's key investment partner. In the interests of our global competitiveness we have to continue removing trade barriers, for example in patent law, industrial standards or in access to stock markets. I am firmly convinced that a common transatlantic market is in Europe's own best interests.

Yet we must not look solely towards America. For Europe's partnership with Russia is also strategically significant and should be expanded as broadly as possible. That is why we have to negotiate a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

The question of cooperation on energy issues will play a key role in this. We will do our utmost to ensure that negotiations can begin during the German Presidency. I will say loud and clear that we need a reliable relationship with Russia, for only then can trust develop.

At the same time, difficult issues such as the media, civil society and Russia's conflicts with its neighbours must not be taboo.

Ladies and gentlemen, at the European Council in March and – since Germany currently holds this Presidency too – at the G8 Summit, we want to lay the foundations for a global climate convention beyond 2012. We know that on the one hand, Europe must play a pioneering role in this area. On the other hand, we also need the United States and other countries. It is therefore important to encourage the US to cooperate more closely with the EU on energy and climate policy than it has done to date. For I am not exaggerating when I say that access to energy and climate protection are the two greatest challenges facing humanity in the 21st century.

Ladies and gentlemen, we also want to redefine the EU's relations with Africa. Africa, our neighbouring continent, is changing. It is worthwhile and wise to invest there, both

politically and economically. We will therefore swiftly begin the preparations for a EU-Africa summit which will take place during the Portuguese Presidency.

Ladies and gentlemen, my aim in taking you on this tour d'horizon today is to mention the key challenges in our foreign and security policy.

But, brief as this overview has to be, one thing is perfectly clear. We can only tackle these challenges by joining forces. We must act as one. That is precisely why, for a European foreign policy, we need a European Union Minister for Foreign Affairs – so that we can practise what we preach. That is another reason for the constitutional treaty.

Ladies and gentlemen, just as Europe has to redefine itself externally, it must also do the same internally.

Safeguarding our prosperity, growth, employment and social security, in short, preserving and developing our model of the European welfare state in the face of globalization – that is what citizens expect from Europe and from their governments.

That is therefore the second priority of our Council Presidency work.

The Lisbon Strategy is based on the vision of a social Europe with a strong economy which deals responsibly with the environment.

The economy is growing, and the trend continues. But that must not, of course, be an end in itself. When I hear the word growth, therefore, I think of jobs. And I am convinced that jobs must be our top priority. That is the social Europe we aspire to.

It goes without saying that we must also consider the conditions for employment. That is why the issue of energy will play a central role at the Council in March, where we will debate all aspects of the Commission's proposals.

The elimination of superfluous red tape is, I believe, another permanent task for European policymakers, alongside the issue of how to create jobs, how to be more effective, how to be more competitive. We will therefore be following very closely the Commission's initiatives which are known to you all under the name of "better legislation".

In this context I hope that we can also discuss the so-called discontinuity principle, i.e. that any EU bills which have not yet passed their third reading are discarded at the end of the European Parliament's legislative period, although I know this is a difficult subject. This is good democratic practice in most Member States. Why should it not be introduced in Europe?

When a new Commission and Parliament are formed, a fresh political start could then be made. I am sure that such a democratic cut-off point would lend the elections to the European Parliament even greater importance. I ask the deputies of the European Parliament to support this idea, also by submitting proposals and ideas to the Presidency.

Ladies and gentlemen, all of these tasks certainly cannot be completed within six months. We have to move away from the short-term approach of six-month Presidencies. Europe needs continuity. That is why the team presidency is so important. I am looking forward to meeting my Portuguese and Slovenian opposite numbers here in Strasbourg this afternoon to kick off the first team presidency in the European Union's history.

Incidentally, this idea of introducing greater continuity in Europe is another new element contained in the constitutional treaty. And now my thoughts have come full circle. It is no coincidence that we are back to the need for constitutional reform.

It is quite clear that a ponderous, bureaucratic and divided Europe will not be able to solve any of the tasks that have to be solved, neither in the area of foreign and security

policy, nor in climate and energy policy, European research policy, the dismantling of bureaucracy and enlargement and neighbourhood policy.

All these challenges call upon Europe to work together. They call for regulations which enable us to work together. They call for redoubled efforts, and they call for the willingness to embrace change and renewal.

I find it rewarding to acknowledge the conditions under which regions of the world can develop most effectively. The American scientist Richard Florida has investigated this and uncovered three deciding factors – technology, talent and tolerance! Only when all three factors come together is sustainable growth in future-oriented areas possible.

Technology, talent and tolerance – what good news for Europe, and what a good maxim for our action! Technology, talent and tolerance – Europe thrives on innovation. Europe thrives on scientific and technological, economic and social progress.

And Europe also thrives on curiosity. To this end Europeans invented a great institution – the universities. They are one of the many European ideas which the whole world now takes for granted. The condition which curiosity needs to develop freely is tolerance.

For only those who do not believe their own opinions to be infallible or superior in every way can have any interest in becoming acquainted with the views, experiences and insights of others. Only those who accept that they are not the only ones capable of intelligent thought, a moral stance and responsible action are willing to learn from others. This is beneficial and helps us grow and develop.

Learning from others leads to new findings. Today we call this innovation. But I am referring to much more than new technological advances. Innovation encompasses cultural achievements, political concepts, intellectual ideas. Without its outstanding innovative potential, Europe would not have become what it is today.

I want to encourage us, indeed, I want to appeal to us to retain our curiosity in a spirit of tolerance, a curiosity which thrives because we believe we can shape the world around us in the 21st century.

The words of the German writer Peter Prange in his book "Werte. Von Plato bis Pop" (Values, from Plato to Pop) are very true, in which he maintains that everything we Europeans have ever achieved, we owe to the contradictions within us, the eternal conflict inside ourselves, the constant jostling between opinions and conflicting opinions, ideas and opposing ideas, theses and antitheses.

And I ask you how, in the wake of countless wars and immeasurable suffering, how, out of all our inconsistencies in Europe, out of all our contradictions, has something as magnificent as the European Union managed to emerge from the Treaties of Rome 50 years ago? What has enabled us to make the best of all this?

You know what I'm going to say. It is that quality which, in my view, defines Europe's approach to its diversity – tolerance.

Why shouldn't we manage to do the same in the next 50 years?

Thank you for your attention.