

Speech by Michel Barnier at the College of Europe, “Europe after Brexit”

Natolin, 29 March 2019

[Check against delivery]

Vice-Rector,

Minister,

Ambassadors,

Students and professors,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to be with you today, here in Natolin, at the heart of Poland and of Europe.

Vice-Rector, I must say that I feel indebted to your institution since several members of my team, including my deputy Sabine Weyand, graduated from the College of Europe, both from Bruges and from Natolin.

So, it is a pleasure to meet all of you, the future graduates, on this special day.

Today was long planned to be Brexit day. This date, 29 March, was chosen by the UK government, when it notified its intention to leave the EU, just two years ago.

I personally regretted the UK’s decision to leave the Union.

In today’s more dangerous, less stable world, with fiercer competition from emerging and developed markets, we, Europeans, have strong reasons to be even more united, not divided.

But we have of course accepted the sovereign decision of the British people.

A Member State has the right to leave the Union. *The Union is no prison!*

The Union is not a place where countries have to stay against their will.

This is the purpose of Article 50. If there is a door to enter the Union, there should also be a door to exit.

The EU must be a positive project, based on a positive political commitment. On *contract rather than constraint*. It is a project built by countries and peoples who chose to pursue shared dreams:

- peace rather than war,
- solidarity rather than isolation,
- prosperity through cooperation rather than unregulated competition and a “race to the bottom”.

It is also a project founded on shared values: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and, the rule of law. This is the heart of our Union, what unites us as Europeans.

And the EU is a project based on law and principles, which promotes a rules-based European and international order.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ever since the referendum in 2016, we have been respectful of the UK’s choice. No spirit of revenge. No punishment. Never!

With the 27 Member States and the European Parliament, we have built coherent positions to allow for the UK’s orderly withdrawal. This was made possible by the strong unity of the 27.

And I am glad that this unity remains very strong, as shown in the European Council last week and again today in my discussions with Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

This unity allowed the 27 to reach a deal with the British government – not against the British government – in November 2018.

Our Withdrawal Agreement brings certainty on all the issues where Brexit creates uncertainty.

- For EU citizens living in the UK – among whom there are about one million Polish citizens – and British nationals in the EU. If they decide to stay in the UK, they will keep their current rights, for the rest of their lives.
- For the many farmers, researchers, regions, businesses and universities in each of our countries who are carrying out projects financed by the EU budget. All commitments taken at 28 will be honoured at 28.
- And for the problem created by Brexit in Ireland and Northern Ireland.
 - This problem is not only about trade and customs. In order to protect peace and stability, both sides have excluded the return of a hard border.
 - At the same time, as President Juncker has said, Ireland's borders are Europe's borders. Any goods arriving from Northern Ireland will be entering not just Ireland, but also Poland, France or Slovakia. Our Agreement makes sure that these goods respect EU rules, for instance for food safety, consumer protection and the prevention of animal disease.

This agreement required efforts on both sides.

It represents a carefully balanced compromise.

It took two years to negotiate and it is not open for renegotiation.

We have also been respectful of the UK's choice by proposing an ambitious future relationship, based on the UK's red lines, while preserving the integrity of the EU Single Market and the autonomy of the Union decision-making process.

In a joint political declaration, we agreed on a broad future relationship with a free trade area, sectorial cooperation, for instance in aviation, police and judicial cooperation and cooperation in foreign policy, external security and defence. This is our common interest.

We are ready to be even more ambitious, should the UK's red lines evolve. For instance, we are open to work on the principle of a permanent customs union should the UK decide to take this path.

Besides, the UK will also be able to take part in EU programmes that are open to third countries, under the conditions and regulations that will be decided in the new EU budget for 2021-2027.

- If the UK respects these conditions, and in particular if it pays its proper contribution, Polish students could be in a position to study in the UK under the Erasmus programme, even after the UK's withdrawal.
- And British universities would still be eligible to engage in research projects with their European partners, under the EU programme for research and innovation.

Finally, we continue to be respectful of the democratic debate in the UK.

On 15 January, the House of Commons rejected the deal that was agreed between Prime Minister May and the 27 Heads of State or Government.

The UK asked for reassurances on the temporary nature of the backstop for Ireland and Northern Ireland.

We agreed to give those reassurances.

Despite the new guarantees, the House of Commons again rejected the deal on 12 March.

The House of Commons also rejected the "no deal" scenario.

And it asked for an extension of the Article 50 period.

Last week, the European Council, under the leadership of Donald Tusk accepted this request.

A new vote will take place later today. In case of a positive vote, which would be the best outcome, the European Council agreed on a technical extension until 22 May, on the eve of the European elections.

The European Council also decided that, should there be no majority for the Withdrawal Agreement by today, the UK should indicate a way forward before 12 April.

Let me be frank: without a positive choice, the default option will be a no deal, which has become more likely. It was never our scenario, but the EU27 is now prepared.

The debates in the House of Commons continue. We are following it closely. What we now need is a positive choice to move forward.

It is the responsibility of each and every member of the House of Commons to tell us today what they want.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For almost two years, we have managed the consequences of Brexit. But we also need to draw lessons from Brexit.

And ask ourselves why in 2016 52 % of the British people voted to leave the European Union.

And I would like to share with you a few thoughts, analyses, ideas, by expressing myself in a personal capacity, as an engaged citizen.

Why is Europe misunderstood and sometimes unpopular?

Of course, there is the ideological view of those who argue, and will always argue, that one nation alone is better equipped to succeed in global competition than a Union of 500 million consumers and 22 million businesses.

Of course, in the 2016 referendum campaign there were some untruths.

There was also a lack of information, as indeed there is in other countries. On what the European Union is, on its project, and above all on the benefits of being a member. There was a terrible lack of debate on what would be the real consequences of leaving behind 45 years of cooperation and joint projects; we see the consequences of that today in the United Kingdom.

But that is not all.

There is also the feeling that Europe, its governments and institutions are not responding to people's legitimate concerns.

A Europe that does not protect them against the excesses of globalisation. That has for too long advocated deregulation and market fundamentalism. Without paying enough attention to the social and environmental consequences.

A Europe that has not been able to fully control its external borders and show solidarity in the face of migration crises.

A Europe that has sometimes abandoned its industry and has not fully anticipated tomorrow's digital world.

And above all, the feeling that Europe does not hold out dreams of a better future for all Europeans.

Again, this feeling is not unique to the UK. We need to listen to this feeling, understand where it comes from, and respond to it.

By acknowledging that Europe has sometimes been wrong.

And by rediscovering the foundations of a European project that allows each Nation, each People, each Citizen to feel protected, and raised up by being part of a collective ambition.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What has been, and what should be the *raison d'être* of the European project?

The history of European integration is in fact quite simple.

Since the 1950s, since the Treaty of Rome, Europe has been the choice of facing the great changes happening in the world and to take control of them rather than endure them, to be an actor rather than a spectator in one's own destiny.

To assert a common sovereignty, where the nation state alone is not enough.

Finally, to pool resources across the continent to define common assets. And carry out projects that are greater than all of us.

- The European Coal and Steel Community, set up in 1951 after a war that had left our civilisation and our societies in ruins, allowed both the industrial reconstruction of Europe and, through this 'de facto solidarity', the construction of a lasting peace that we have enjoyed for more than 70 years.
- The common agricultural policy, launched in 1962, has allowed us together to regain food sovereignty, preserve diversity, the traceability and quality of products, and never to re-live hunger and ration books.
- Cohesion policy, developed since 1988, notably under the Jacques Delors Commission, has made it possible for the most disadvantaged regions gradually to catch up as our Union has enlarged, building shared prosperity. And Poland's economic success is testimony to this.
- The progress from a collection of national markets to a common market, achieved in 1993, which Commissioner Elżbieta Bieńkowska is currently continuing, has encouraged the growth of our businesses, especially our small and medium-sized businesses, while giving consumers more choice.
- And since 1999, the single currency has facilitated trade among us and protected us against exchange-rate risk. We forget all too often that, by protecting us from American monetary hegemony, the euro is also an instrument of emancipation.

We can be proud of all these common assets!

And we can be proud to have strengthened them over time, especially since 1 May 2004, almost 15 years ago, when Poland and nine other countries joined the European Union in a great moment of reunification of the European continent.

What other set of nations, what other Continent has so many collective achievements to its name?

And yet, in many of our countries, political forces see the nation as the only level of authority relevant to addressing people's problems.

We need Nations, in particular to fight nationalism.

Each one has its national identity, its language, its culture, its traditions; Europe must respect them. That is what makes Europe so diverse. And at the same time we have common values that are the reason we are together.

Today, once again and even more brutally than in the past, there are major global changes that we must face together.

Faced with challenges such as climate change, migration, industrial and technological change and terrorism, faced with the United States' unilateralist temptations, China's assertiveness or Russia's influence, our nations alone, isolated, just don't have enough weight.

If we want to meet these challenges, we must rediscover the ambition behind the construction of Europe and build new common assets, shared by a community of 27.

To be both Europeans and patriots! Being European means coming together as well as being a patriot!

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At a time when, in each of our countries, thousands of young people are marching to defend the climate, is it not the role of the Union to do that too?

Climate change does not stop at national borders! It concerns us all:

- Farmers are the first to suffer from floods and droughts.
- City dwellers the first to suffer from poor air quality and all its effects on our health.

Faced with this challenge, a green Europe must be a priority for the coming years.

Together let us take on an ambitious goal: to make Europe the first carbon-neutral economy by 2050.

We have powerful levers at European level. We must make full use of them by applying a green priority in all our budgetary policies and proper use of our regulatory powers.

- In 2005 we set up what is today the largest carbon market in the world through the Emissions Trading System, the ETS.
- We must pay a fair price for CO₂ emissions, including imported emissions. The polluter pays principle should apply to all sectors.

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the same time, this green Europe cannot be achieved at the expense of our jobs or social cohesion. Nor at the expense of our agriculture and industry, but working with them!

There are a number of regions – I think of Silesia and others – that must accompany this transition.

Industrial ambition is in fact a necessary condition for this ecological transition to succeed.

At a time when many are calling for a ‘Green New Deal’, referring to Roosevelt’s visionary programme in 1930s America, Europe is the continent where we can and must achieve this.

Together we must invest massively in key technologies such as hydrogen, new-generation solar panels, green chemistry and batteries.

- I read recently that 60 % of existing or planned automotive batteries are produced in China, 15 % in the US and less than 4 % in the EU.
- We need to react! By using all the levers we have: taxation, regulation of the financial markets, the European Investment Bank, and if necessary a bank for the climate.

Together, we need to make our economy more circular.

- Today, for seven tonnes of raw materials absorbed by the European economy, only one comes from the recycling of waste. This is not sustainable!
- Let us start by launching a major plan of action against planned obsolescence, particularly for mobile phones. 500 million Europeans have the critical mass to compel manufacturers to act.

Together, in the run-up to the Global Biodiversity Summit in Beijing, we must lead this battle, as we did on the climate with the Paris Agreement.

- For years we have been warned about the disappearance of bees. And today we learn that one third of all insects are threatened with extinction.
- Our agricultural practices must continue to evolve, in the context of an open debate with our farmers about the modernisation of the Common Agricultural Policy, the development of our standards and protection against unfair competition from third countries.

On all these issues, let us never lose sight of the fact that the ecological debt we pass on to our children is at least as serious as the budgetary debt.

That is why, in the same way as we have a Stability Pact for our budgets, our countries should respond to the challenges of the environment through this sustainability pact.

Ladies and gentlemen,

At a time when China is asserting itself not just as a partner but also a competitor and a strategic rival, is it not Europe's role to implement a genuine industrial policy?

We are the most open continent for trade, direct investment and public procurement. To be of real benefit to our businesses, this openness can no longer be one-way. For a while now, Europe is no longer naïve.

How can we explain that a Chinese or Indian company wins public contracts in Europe if our own companies are excluded from tendering in China or India?

This is why I am pleased that the Commission has again put forward a regulation to impose reciprocity in public procurement, as I myself proposed in 2012 as Internal Market Commissioner. This proposal must now be made operational, and also more binding.

The recently adopted foreign investment screening mechanism is also going in the right direction, but probably not far enough. We need to develop together this toolbox of a 'Europe that protects'.

That being said, ladies and gentlemen, we would be wrong to think that our successes or failures depend on the behaviour of others.

If we want a strong industry, we must first take up the challenge of our own competitiveness.

By investing together, which is still the best form of protection. And also by addressing the fundamental issue of skills and human capital.

- In 2017, 43 % of Europeans lacked basic digital skills. This figure is not reassuring when digital technologies have become the key to our competitiveness.
- And let us be aware of how artificial intelligence is about to tip us into in a new world that will affect every aspect of our lives, from our work to our leisure time to our health. This is a colossal challenge. Here too, we cannot be content just to endure.
- Digital training is fundamental. Let's be inspired by what works! Finland has set the target to train 1 % of its population in the basic concepts of artificial intelligence through a public-private partnership.
- Why shouldn't the EU also set itself the target of training 1 % of its population in the next three to five years? As we did with the Juncker plan, Europe should launch a skills investment plan – *Up-skilling Europe*. Our jobs are at stake. And our productivity. And our ability to create Europe's future unicorns or GAFAs.

- Today, the top 20 digital companies are all American or Chinese. One company alone, Amazon, invests 14 billion euros a year in research – more than the budget of the research and innovation programme for the whole of the Union! In Europe too, the time has come to scale up!

Finally, let us not forget the normative and ethical disruption of digital change

- Through our single market, we still have the ability to impose fair competition and have standards adopted worldwide. Not only to protect our data. But also to defend our values and our democracy.
- Artificial intelligence and bio-engineering will increase the risks to our model of society and to our conception of the human. Let us not underestimate the need to act together.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I have talked about only two of the changes that require a collective leap forward. There are many others.

At a time when the United States is withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, when China is aiming to be the world's leading military power by 2050, when Russia is gaining influence in Europe's neighbourhood, is it not the role of the Union to do more for its defence?

As President Jean-Claude Juncker often says, we cannot be content to fund 17 different systems of tanks with our national budgets, compared with one single system in the United States.

We cannot be content to have no headquarters at European level worthy of the name, when we know that the need for action at Union level, alongside NATO, will become ever more pressing.

Finally, faced with the challenge of migration, which is not about to disappear, is it not also Europe's role to ensure that our common external borders are under control?

That we work together with the source countries on the causes of migration, on defining legal channels and on combating trafficking.

And that in an area of freedom, without internal borders, each country takes its share of responsibility, particularly in the processing of asylum applications.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Whether we are talking about creating a green Europe, industrial ambitions, a European defence or common responses to migration, Europe will not be built without you.

In a few months' or a few years' time, you will be graduates of the College of Europe.

Even before coming to Natolin or Bruges, most of you studied abroad, thanks to the Erasmus programme, EU-funded research programmes, or simply the free movement of people in the Union.

All this probably seems natural to you. That we take it for granted is proof of what we have built together in Europe.

But let us not forget that these opportunities for exchange in a united Europe were unthinkable 30 years ago on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

You are part of a generation of Europeans who live in peace. Which is free and prosperous, as no other generation before it.

Let us not forget that these achievements are still fragile. Sudden reversals are possible. They are even sought after by many political parties, in each of our countries.

If you want to preserve these achievements, this unique way of life in the world, take care of Europe!

Do not accept the status quo!

Share and defend your vision of Europe!

Whatever your ideas, get involved, especially in the coming debate for the European elections.

And, in your own areas of responsibility, in business, in public service, in education or in the voluntary sector, keep on getting involved and defending what you believe in.

A few weeks ago on a train I met Mark, a British professor working in Amsterdam on European space policy. He summarised his regret about Brexit in one sentence. Eight words of dreams and regrets:

'Only together can we explore the solar system'.

What is true for the solar system is also true for climate change, the challenge of data, defence and the fight against poverty.

We all have our dreams and our regrets.

All I know is that each and every one of us has a role to play in maintaining the European dream.

As 27 nations we can and must launch new visionary projects for your generation and those to come.

What we do not do for Europe, nobody will do in our place.

Thank you for your attention.