

**Speech at the opening of the Youth Summit at the University Roma Tre,
Saturday 24 March 2007 at 9:00 h**

Time available: 8 Minutes

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, friends,

INTRODUCTION

- I am very pleased indeed to join you at the opening of the first European Union Youth Summit. This is a special moment for all of us. Because we celebrate Europe's 50th anniversary. It is also special because today we are starting a new dialogue together with young people on the future of Europe.

EUROPE A SUCCESS STORY

- Tomorrow, it's Europe's 50th birthday. It's time for a celebration. We are beginning a New Year in the history of the European Union. So we should ask ourselves, what New Year resolutions should Europe make. What can we each commit ourselves to doing, to make the kind of Europe we really want?
- First, looking back over the last 50 years, we see that European integration is a success story, if an unfinished one. It is unique in the world. It is born out of the experience that nationalism and narrow self-interest do not solve problems, but rather create them.
- The pro-European movement which brought down the borders between countries and peoples was driven by that generation of young people who suffered during the Second World War. The added value of European integration is that it is more than the sum of its parts. Its *raison d'être* is to bring its peoples and states closer together to create joint solutions when we have shared problems.

- Today most young people continue to be pro-integration. According to a Eurobarometer survey last year, 60% of young people say that their country's membership of the EU is a "good thing" and 65% say that their country has benefited from it.

THE CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE

- But the picture is not all rosy for young people. Unemployment is high; unstable jobs are common. Europe has too many early school leavers – in 2005, about 6 million young people left education early. Young people who are left behind in education, and who are excluded through unemployment and the risk of poverty, feel they have no stake in society. These difficulties are among the causes of social unrest and the breakdown of trust between citizens. We must face up to them.
- And added to that, we have globalisation and growing world competition: they require young people to be more mobile and more flexible than ever. Young people are rightly concerned by climate change and the uncertainty of the world they are inheriting – and these issues can drive the generations apart.
- We need to put our heads together to come up with solutions. We also need to agree on what kind of Europe can provide the right solutions, and how Europe should be organised to implement them. These are the issues you've been discussing, preparing for the key messages you'll deliver today.

PARTICIPATION AS A KEY TO RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES

- My message to you, in turn, and to our leaders meeting in Berlin, is that we need your answers. We need the input of young people in shaping our societies, our Europe and our world.

- As Alcide de Gasperi, one of the founders of today's Europe, said, we must transfer the European ideal to the new generation. They are '*the best preservers of the common heritage that we will hand over to them*'.
- This is what European youth policy concentrates on. Finding ways to make sure that young people are fully part of society – through having choices in education and work; through being respected as individuals; but also through having the opportunities to speak out and be listened to.
- The situation is not yet perfect. But my impression is that today, in nearly all Member States, no major initiative concerning young people can be taken without consulting young people on the decision.
- Nothing about you, without you.
- That's a necessity. According to Eurobarometer this year, when young people are asked what "would help them to be more active as a citizen in society" 81% answer that they wish "to be consulted before any public decision concerning them is taken".

EMBEDDING DIALOGUE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN YOUTH POLICY

- But *I* do not want to stop there. I want to go further and establish a real structured dialogue with young people. A dialogue which embraces the major political themes of the EU, and which will take us in the first stage up to the European elections in 2009, which the votes of young people can certainly influence.
- It is not as if we are starting from scratch: there is already close cooperation between young people and EU institutions. But it has to become a real partnership.
- The new Youth in Action Programme can help us realise our ambitions. There are many committed young people who want to get involved. Between

2000 and 2006 more than 800.000 young people took part in the Youth Programme. I want to reach these young people and their peers.

- But I think we can do more and better. Vast networks of youth organisations and information services reach millions of young people around Europe. Why not use these to mobilise young people and give them the opportunity to have a say? Why not involve young people in monitoring what actually happens in youth policies in Europe?
- I intend to make this dialogue real and I intend to make it a success. I will bring out a proposal this year to firmly embed the concept of 'Nothing about young people, without young people' in youth policy in Europe.

CONCLUSION

- So this Youth Summit today is opening a new chapter. You have a golden opportunity to address national and European leaders, tell them what sort of New Year resolutions you want from Europe. They are ready to listen.
- A young Bolivian delegate reminded the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2002: “You call us the future, but we are also the present.”
- Here in Europe, we are laying together the foundation of a new dialogue. We will build this dialogue into a permanent part of the European landscape, a space where we can get to know each other better, talk to each other. In the tradition of our European founders, we must use the present to construct joint and lasting solutions to shape Europe’s future for the better.
- Thank you.