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**Herman Van Rompuy  
President of the European Council**

**Lecture at the European University at Saint Petersburg  
Russia and Europe today**

It's a great pleasure to speak here today at the European University at Saint Petersburg. A pleasure for at least three reasons.

First, this University is a great place of learning and exchange, and enjoys strong ties with European institutions. The University and its excellent staff have in a short time built up a solid reputation of a high-quality teaching and research university.

Second, it is a joy to be in Saint Petersburg. Its elegance is truly captivating, but the charm and magic do not end there. Yes, Saint Petersburg is also the epitome of Russia's opening towards Europe – окно (the "window"). It embodies the determination of earlier generations of Russian leaders to become closer partners with countries and societies to their west. This city illustrates their successful drive to modernize the Russia of their times.

It is here that Russia and Europe really came together. It is obvious in the marvellous architecture, inspired by the visits of a young tsar to cities like Amsterdam, and designed with Frenchmen and Italians. In its own way, this University stands proud in this tradition: the Rector just told me that some of Western Europe's brightest architects are taking part in the competition to redesign your building!

**P R E S S**

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There is a third reason why I am most grateful for your invitation to speak about Europe and Russia today. We are now more than two decades after the transformative years of 1989/1991, which resulted in a new, enlarged Europe and a new, more open Russia. It is an important moment: now we can see more clearly than before the new world we have entered, and what part we can play in this world. Today and tomorrow's G20 summit, in this very city, is a good reminder of the huge shared challenges at hand.

Before going into the events of the day, I should first like to take a step back. We cannot solidly trace out a common path for the future if we ignore our past. Russia and the other countries of Europe share a continent and a history. To quote the early-19th-century intellectual Pyotr Chaadayev: *"Just as individuals are moral beings, so are nations. And as people are taught by the passing years, so are nations taught by the centuries"*. Today we would phrase it differently, but there is some truth in this. History lives in each of us, even unconsciously.

We Europeans, we know one another. We – the French, the Prussians then Germans, the Swedes, the Dutch, the Italians, the Poles, the British, the Russians, and all the others, we have read each other's books, we listened to each other's music, we believed in the same God, we have engaged in battles between various sides, we spoke and traded with, and learned from each other, and at times have misunderstood each other.

Perhaps we are, as has been said, one "European family". But then again, one must be careful with a word like that, because to me it immediately brings to mind the first line of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: *"All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."* I would say that the European family can be happy in its own way.

As for your country, I am fully aware of the historical Russian debates about whether or not your nation fully belongs to this European family. Did Russia belong East, West or ever in between? At the risk of sounding paradoxical, I would say that such collective self-examination is... very European indeed! It does not differ fundamentally from how peoples and societies to your West have had to define their own relationship with their neighbours and the world – think of the case of Great-Britain. Or how to position themselves as societies towards modernity, religion, science, statehood and democracy.

It is an ongoing conversation, within each of our countries and between all our countries; in my conviction, it takes place within a unique, shared set of ideas, values, beliefs and experiences, a common cultural heritage. One that people from Africa, the Arab world, from China or even America effortlessly identify as... 'Europe'! They have no doubts!

From this great shared cultural pantheon, even if courtesy towards his home-city would encourage me to single out Dostoyevsky..., I should like to mention Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy.

Asked right before last year's Nobel Peace Prize ceremony what book inspired me most as a European, my spontaneous answer was: *War and Peace*. A moving love story, a fascinating panorama of society and politics, and also (in chapters that some readers skip but which I find always inspiring!) a wise reflection on the great, anonymous forces of history – forces which not even great leaders like Emperor Napoleon or Tsar Alexander were able to keep in check...

In the 20th century, stronger forces than ever before were unleashed on humanity: political, economical, ideological. The old concert of nations was replaced by a bipolar global system. For your country a zenith both of power and of sacrifice. I do not want to jump over the so-called "Short Twentieth Century" of 1914-1991 as if it were a parenthesis. The return to this city's historical name testifies of new beginnings after 1991, a reason to rejoice. Yet the past of Soviet communism cannot and must not be forgotten if we want to build a strong relationship for the future. The period has also left scars; here, and abroad. Yet wounds heal – not just through time and patience, but also through active efforts to better understand each other. The improved Polish-Russian relationship, symbolised by the acknowledgment of the Katyn massacre, is but one good example, which has resonated positively in Europe as a whole.

Back in the 1950s, as you know, six of the countries that happened to be on the west of the Iron Curtain started to develop a new cooperation. It was a daring project, unprecedented, a project to anchor peace in a continent devastated by wars. Today we are twenty-eight countries working together as a Union: sharing a space for citizens, students and businesses, using the same currency, and jointly dealing with our neighbours and international partners. But you know all that, not least since this University has an excellent Centre for European Studies!

As President of the European Council, the body which unites the twenty-eight Presidents and Prime-Minister of our countries, I can say here that all EU leaders strive for positive relations with Russia, as a key strategic partner and our most important neighbour. Like any relationship, it is about interests and ideals, respect and trust. But in my speech up until now, I hope to have made clear that, in our case, other factors come into play too: a shared history and also this feeling of identity. It may be invisible, but it's ever present! As a result, expectations can be higher, disappointments deeper...Precisely as among members of a family!

Looking to our future, I strongly believe that ultimately we want the same things. We want our citizens to be prosperous and safe; and we want peace and security between countries in Europe and in the world.

Of course, we might not always agree in how to get there, in fact, that happens often; yet we share the goal – not just rhetorically (as during the Cold War) but profoundly. Looking to the decades ahead, I believe our societies will grow closer to one another, and that our economic systems, our political institutions will do so too – each of us following our own path.

Already today, our countries are deeply involved with each other. Just look at trade, which makes it immediately visible. I won't bore you here with the figures; suffice to say that we are among each other's most important partners, and this is not only about energy imports and exports. If you want one figure: close to half of Russian trade happens with EU countries.

A Russia that is economically strong is good for Europe, and vice versa. You have helped some of our member states in financial distress. When it comes to energy, we are your biggest client. We strongly support your country's bid to join the World Trade Organisation throughout the very, very long negotiation process.

To us, membership goes beyond rules and statistics, it is also about the very *spirit* of trade. That is: the conviction that open trade and fair competition make our societies more modern, stronger, and better equipped to thrive in today's global economy. That's why, while your country is working on the modernisation of its economy, all EU economies are working to become more competitive.

The truth is, our future economic growth will be fuelled by the power of ideas and our ability to rise to the challenges of a fast changing world. Innovation, research is central. I'm glad that cooperation between Russia and Europe in research and higher education is particularly dynamic. I hope that many of the students and young researchers present here will be able to make the most of this common space: you are the future!

Innovation usually works better if we create the conditions. We can't rest on yesterday's breakthroughs, however stunning they were. I feel we need to rediscover the entrepreneurial spirit of earlier days. We will find this mentality more in small and medium companies than in large, state-owned ones.

For our societies to thrive tomorrow, the as yet unknown creative minds of today must have breathing space to develop their ideas. They must be able to project themselves into the future, to think broadly and long-term. Talents and ideas need freedom and a reliable legal environment. This is true in a wider sense. Societies are stronger if there is more trust, therefore more rule of law and less corruption, if individuals and organisations do not have to fear arbitrariness, if they feel free to speak their mind, to live their identity (also their sexual identity), and to dialogue. A vibrant society is not unstable. It is vibrant.

I acknowledge it is still difficult for Russians to travel to Europe (and also for Europeans to travel to Russia). Talks on visa are ongoing on two fronts: one on the better facilitation of long-term residence; the other towards liberalisation of short-term visits. I know the expectations are high. Yet we must admit that visa-free visits cannot be reached overnight, since it involves delicate matters such as the way we manage our borders, migration, and the rule of law. We must go there step by step and we are making progress.

We share common borders, and also common neighbours. Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova which matter to us both, have to define their own path. But in our view, for Ukraine, an Association Agreement with the European Union would not damage the country's long-standing ties with Russia. Why should it have to be a case of 'either/or'?

More generally, and even if it does not only depend upon us..., lasting security on the European continent cannot be achieved unless Russia and the European Union work closely together. We have already done a great deal since the end of the Cold War confrontation, and can be proud of that.

Together, we should do more and try harder to solve the so-called 'protracted' conflicts still remaining in our common neighbourhood, such as the Transnistria conflict in Moldova. There's always a way to overcome deep-seated tensions after wars; take France and Germany after 1945, or otherwise the Balkans today. Looking to the other side of the Black Sea, to Georgia, we very much welcome the steps towards resuming normal economic relations and of informal diplomatic contacts between Moscow and Tbilisi: this positive momentum should be used. In any case we support the territorial integrity of Georgia.

In the wider world, we must honestly admit that our assessments of some situations have differed, in particular as regards Libya and Syria. What is happening in the whole Arab region is a tectonic shift. It will take time to find a stable equilibrium. But the people want their say and this will not change. They are also opposed to extremism and fanaticism.

The situation in Syria is dark: civil war, a hundred thousand dead, two million refugees. And two weeks ago, the cynical use of chemical weapons against civilians: a blatant violation of international law. As international community we have a responsibility to stop the bloodshed, to hold the perpetrators accountable, and to refuse dreadful precedents being set. The international community cannot remain idle. A clear and strong response is crucial. Any action must include the long-term view; I hope you agree with me that the status quo is untenable.

Everyone has come to realise that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. We must bring the parties to the conflict to the negotiations table. Russia has a key role here. The risks for the region are real, and many more lives are at stake.

Looking from a further distance at the events in the Arab world (not only in Syria but also in Egypt for instance), they force us also to reflect on our capacity – that of Europe, of the West, of those players who in old days were called the Great Powers –, to shape events abroad at will. For Europe and Russia, this is another shared experience... We are no longer living in a bipolar world. It's not even multi-polar, in fact perhaps rather *a*-polar!

I mentioned earlier that precisely because Europeans and Russians know each other so well, expectations can be higher, disappointments deeper... That is why it is important to set aside the many caricatures which hamper our relationship. Preachy hypocrites, nostalgic cynics... Powerless values, values-less power... Oh yes, we know the clichés. Those who give in to these false mirrors misjudge the relationship. They arise precisely because we hold each other to high standards, which is in itself the highest sign of respect. Clear-headed, realistic respect, between two of the world's most important players, Russia and Europe today.

True to my earlier confession, I should like to finish with a quote from *War and Peace*. It is towards the end, Tolstoy describing Pierre Bezukhov's new mindset after his release from captivity: one of *tolerance*. (I quote) "*Pierre recognised that it's impossible to change a man's convictions with words; that everyone thinks, feels, and sees things from his own point of view.*"

Whereas he used to be "*excited and irritated*" by the differences, even contradictions, between different persons (or between one person's opinions and his actions), all this "*now became a source of sympathy [...] drawing from him an amused and gentle smile.*"

I hope this Bezukhovian mindset can also help improve our relations. And make sure we become a family, happy in our own way! Спасибо! [thank you!]