It's always a pleasure to come to Leuven, "my" university, and certainly on an evening like tonight to introduce such a unique personality.

This is no usual evening: even in Leuven, it really is exceptional for a philosopher to gather such a crowd! (Beyond this room even!)

This huge public interest shows not only the exceptional character of our guest, but also that the theme he has chosen to address tonight couldn't be more timely: the future of democracy in Europe.

Obviously Professor Jürgen Habermas needs no introduction for this audience. One of today's most influential philosophers. A voice of reason in an age of turbulence. For half a century, he has written on the importance of a free public sphere. Making a powerful case for European unity: as a counterforce against extreme nationalism, as the best hope for our continent's political future.

When I studied philosophy myself, here in Leuven – in 1968 more precisely, that magical year –, some of my friends already held him in very high esteem. And since then I have of course often encountered his name. Professor, too few intellectuals have a Europe-wide resonance. That is why I was so pleased to have the opportunity to meet you in my current capacity, last September.

You came to me, with one main question – a crucial one. You had been following closely the political response to the crisis, regularly commenting on it, and you wanted to know: "Are European leaders aware that they face historic choices today?"
My answer to you then was (and still is): Yes they do. Maybe not all leaders were fully aware of their role all-of-the-time, and each had his own concerns, but jointly they were (and still are) capable of taking big decisions, which later will be seen as of historical importance.

Decisions that saved the euro, that safeguarded European unity, and that in the process are changing our Union. We survived the storm, and we stayed together. If we had failed, perhaps we would not have been here this evening…

The problems are not over, of course not. Now that the euro is on safer ground, we can and must deal with the economic and social problems, and we are working on that.

Together we talked about how in the crisis leaders came to realise how interdependent their countries have become and that they share a joint responsibility. Despite the temptation to blame Europe, they all know that for the good of the country, they have to take difficult and highly unpopular decisions – euro or no euro, Union or Union. And that they have to bring answers to the serious problems that their predecessors had ignored for too long.

When we spoke, we did not agree on everything. But then again, we each have our own role, as politicians, or as intellectuals. Roles with different responsibilities.

You also told me how you worried about countries tempted to go it alone, including your own country Germany. What left me the most lasting impression was the emotion you shared when talking about your country. I could suddenly see you as young man, aged fifteen when the Second World War ended, and a life from then on dedicated to a cause. To bring more ethics into politics…

This deep motif was bound to bring Europe on your path. For no country more than for your own, has Europe been such a source of redemption. A new beginning, a promise. For me also, it has been the most inspiring idea. Reconciliation and togetherness. From "us versus they" to "You and me". Ich und Du.

I had the privilege to speak about this on behalf of all Europeans at the Nobel ceremony in Oslo. We all admire the historic achievement of post-war leaders.

Yet the initial mode of European integration is no longer feasible: not in the world of today. Citizens see how important European decisions are, and they rightly want a say. Public opinion has become more central than ever before (not only in European politics of course, also in national politics).

Within our Union, it means the end of the age of polite indifference between the peoples in our countries (or sometimes impolite). Because not only leaders discovered their interdependence, so did the citizens. For the very first time, Europe is now in the heart of the political debate in each country.
The integration via the euro is so profound that Europe has become part of daily life. We are not living the nationalisation of European politics, no, we see the Europeanisation of national politics – and this will ultimately make the common endeavour stronger. Provided we avoid the ingredients of modern political life: clichés, slogans, caricatures. Of (good) hard-working Northerners versus (bad) lazy Southerners. Or of (good) generous Southerners versus (bad) selfish Northerners.

Here in this country, we know these clichés all by heart! We can deplore or demonise them. But we can also consider that it is natural that it takes time for the public to digest the enormous discovery of what it really means to share a Union, what it really means to share a currency. The responsibility of political leaders is to give each other that time, to bridge the differences, to foster trust. And it is true that correcting past errors – of growth models based on excessive private and public debt – is taking more time than we thought. And that in the meantime, the economic and social price to pay is higher than we had foreseen.

Yet time alone is not enough. The decisions taken to get out the crisis, also call for new European responses in terms of legitimacy. The European Union is only fully legitimate with the broad support of the people. (Although in a democracy, one will always find dissenting voices.) We both agree on that. And we both agree that focusing only on institutional discussions in the Brussels micro-cosmos circumvents the fundamental questions. We need a real debate involving the public – in all our countries. But a debate not based on passions and clichés.

But here we face a paradox, as you often have highlighted. Less-subtle-thinkers-than-yourself sometimes make a caricature out of the debate on Europe’s democratic nature. They say for instance that the “Europe of the citizens” must finally take over from the “Europe of the states” – by which they usually mean decisions by national leaders in the European Council. "Exit the states, enter the citizens", they call for.

But in my experience, when I chair our discussions in the European Council, today’s national leaders are very close to their public opinions, to their citizens (some people might say, too close) – but each of them to their own citizens, who elect them.

(Entre parenthèses, this makes it sometimes incredibly difficult and time-consuming to reach consensus at the European Council table; I know this critique, but from a democratic point of view, one can hardly reproach to leaders that they have voters!)

The reflection on Europe's democratic future cannot avoid this dilemma. The basic tension between the citizens in their national capacity and the citizens in their European capacity. And these are the same people!

We are 500 million Europeans, living in 27 countries, with many spaces of European debate. And if I just look at the neighbouring countries of Belgium: "Europe" clearly resonates differently here in Belgium, than in France, the Netherlands, Germany, not to forget Luxembourg and the United Kingdom…!
But they all debate Europe. There are no easy answers to Europe’s legitimacy. There always will have to be a double legitimacy, because also in a more integrated Europe, the nation-state will remain key. In the end it’s a tension, not between institutions, but between identities, and even between identities in our own mind. Europe is complicated because we Europeans are complicated.

But you, Professor, know this very well. And this is why you, from your perspective, just as I in my own political role, want people to become more aware that they are (also) European. On an evening like this one, you are reaching out to build this European public sphere.

We share the conviction that Europe in the end is not a problem, but a solution, that Europe is not "them", but "us".

Our Europe, our Union.