

“Europe at a crossroads: new pathways for old partners”

Jean-Marc,

Students,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let's start with a show of hands: who in this room has already completed a semester abroad as an Erasmus student?

And who is studying as an Erasmus student here in Rotterdam right now?

I envy you. The Erasmus programme allows you to experience the richness Europe has to offer. And studying in Rotterdam, at this top-level university, is a great opportunity.

So doing both at once, being an Erasmus student at Erasmus University – well, it must seem like you've just discovered the joy of a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich!

I want to hear about your experiences, about your views on Europe, about your concerns, and about your dreams.

And I'm happy to share this opportunity with my French colleague, Minister Ayrault. France and the Netherlands are old friends in Europe. We're two of the six founding nations of the European Union – or the European Coal and Steel Community, as it was called back in 1952. Many newer friends have joined us since then. But I like to call to mind one of Erasmus's adages:

"When you make new friends, do not forget the old ones."

[Als je nieuwe vrienden maakt, houd dan de oude in ere]

It's certainly a lesson that both our countries take to heart. That's why we meet once a year, this time in Rotterdam, to discuss European developments. The *Initiative Franco-Néerlandaise* allows old friends to explore how they can work together to address new challenges.

[Challenges]

Indeed, Europe faces no shortage of challenges today. I'll touch on a few of them, and then I'll share a couple of solutions. Sometimes we may need less Europe, sometimes we may need more Europe, but in any case we need a different Europe – a new approach to how we work together.

For the first time in the history of our European partnership, one of our friends has decided to leave the club.

The United Kingdom, the third largest member state, will exit the European Union.

It's tempting to explain Brexit as a purely British affair – to say, as some have, that 'all politics is local'. But that would be short-sighted. Many of the concerns that emerged in the run-up to the referendum are well-known throughout the European continent.

Some of the benefits the European Union provides – like peace and freedom – seem at times to be taken for granted. Mistrust between member states has grown. And confidence in European institutions is alarmingly low. People don't always trust the European Union – or even their national government – to serve their best interests. They ask: who is making the decisions about my future, and my children's future? Are we still in control of our country?

Next year, both France and the Netherlands will have national elections. I expect many of the concerns I've mentioned to take centre stage in campaigning.

Let me be clear: I don't believe in simplistic mantras. Federalists think 'more Europe' is the answer to everything. Nationalists believe dissolving the European Union will solve all our problems.

I'm not a federalist.

I'm not a nationalist.

I'm a Dutch European.

I believe strong, well-governed member states make for a strong Europe. And I believe a 'lean and mean' European Union makes for strong European countries. We need less Europe in some areas, and more Europe in others.

Above all, we need a modern European Union. A Union that enables member states to offer their citizens more prosperity and more security. A Union that offers Europeans better protection, a Union that performs better, and a Union that sticks to its principles.

[Less Europe: better regulation]

We certainly don't need to elevate every type of decision-making to the European level. If there's no Europe-wide problem, there's no need to come up with a European solution. In many cases, existing agreements will be sufficient. In those cases, the European Commission simply has to hold member states to their promises.

Brussels needs to repeal unnecessary rules, simplify complicated ones and be very cautious about new legislation. The European Union needs to spend its political capital elsewhere.

The Netherlands has pushed hard for the Commission's Better Regulation agenda. It's so successful that the European Parliament is even complaining that it has too little to do. I have no problem with that at all! We need fewer rules and more results.

[More Europe: migration, climate change, economy, security]

In other areas, European countries will have to cooperate more closely. Sometimes, 'more Europe' can make us stronger. There are challenges no European country can deal with single-handedly.

Take migration and the need to strengthen Europe's external border.

Take security and the arc of instability around the European Union.

Take the need to make our economies innovative, climate-friendly, and prosperous for everyone – we can't do that without the single market.

These challenges will not go away if we retreat behind our national borders. We need more Europe in those areas and we need it now.

France and the Netherlands are natural allies. We're working closely together on defence. Together we're winning the battle against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. We're partners in Mali and the Sahel region: our contribution to the MINUSMA peacekeeping mission is a model for missions elsewhere.

Both our countries agree about Europe's need for more strategic autonomy. Europe has taken the American military umbrella for granted for too long. It's time to step up to the challenge.

We may be witnessing a pivotal moment in history. The global centre of gravity is shifting towards Asia. Russia, Turkey and Iran are becoming more assertive. In the United States, the White House will soon welcome a new President whose motto is 'America First'.

European countries must work together to export stability and become credible guarantors of security – otherwise, we will import instability from the regions around us.

We need to invest more in defence so that we at last honour our NATO commitments. And European cooperation can get us there faster. Not working together would mean a tremendous waste of time and money.

According to some estimates, European countries are throwing away up to 100 billion euros a year because they are failing to specialise and cooperate on defence. In other words, we're throwing taxpayers' money down the drain because we're all doing the same things on our own, instead of working together.

France and the Netherlands see eye-to-eye on many of these issues. For example, we agree that we need a central planning capability for EU missions – right now, we can only coordinate between the different national headquarters.

We also agree on the need for a more social Europe. It's up to member states to choose their own social systems. No need to change that. But by working together, we can protect Europe from globalisation's excesses. Like unfair competition. Like worsening working conditions. Like tax evasion. Equal pay for equal work in the same country – that should be the basic principle.

We know that some people stand to lose from globalisation. Europe can give them support. We have a Globalisation Fund for precisely that reason. We offer a Youth Guarantee – anyone under 25 must either be in work, at school, or in training. We have a European Investment Plan and a European Investment Bank. Let's explore whether the European Union can add even more value when it comes to building a social economy.

[Different European Union]

Ladies and gentlemen,

I've talked about the need for less Europe when it comes to lawmaking.

I've talked about the need for more Europe when it comes to the great challenges of our time: migration, security, climate change, and globalisation.

But even more important than less or more Europe, is the need for a different Europe.

The European Union needs to evolve from a lawmaking machine into a results machine. Our Union has to become less legal and more political: big on the big issues, small on the small issues.

In an emergency, you can't negotiate on the basis of a directive. The EU-Turkey declaration is a case in point. You can't solve the migration crisis with a decree. Member states will often have to take the initiative. And the Commission should be far more sensitive to the concerns of national parliaments.

And if the European Union is to become more of a political actor, we'll have to accept something else. We can't do everything with all 28 members – or 27, after Brexit. That's a luxury we can't afford. Some member states lack the capacity to join every initiative. Others lack public support. We need a Champions League for European cooperation. France and the Netherlands belong in that Champions League.

I see great potential in the idea of leading groups of countries. We already have them: take the euro area, or the Schengen area. We should consider stepping up our defence cooperation with member states that are willing to join us.

This kind of flexibility enables Europe to deliver results. I would attach only one condition: no member state should renege on its existing promises. No backtracking after we've reached an agreement.

[Conclusion]

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me end on a positive note. European cooperation has brought this part of the world 70 years of unbroken peace and prosperity. That's unheard of in the history of mankind.

In those 70 years, we Europeans have reinvented our partnership many times. Today we have to reinvent Europe again. We need to transform Europe from a lawmaking machine into a political powerhouse that our societies can trust. We need to get the European Union to protect and perform rather than alienate. We Europeans must pull together to export stability, so that we don't import instability.

I'm convinced that we can do even better than we have in the past 70 years. And that will also be up to all of you. So I look forward to hearing your ideas, your concerns, your dreams about Europe's future.

Thank you.