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COMMUNICATING EUROPE – MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

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- ES GILT DAS GESPROCHENE WORT -

*Das Forum Constitutionis Europae ist eine gemeinsame Veranstaltung des
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

it is a great honour to be here today in this dignified place of teaching, learning and debating. And for several years now, it is as well a privileged and distinguished platform to present and discuss ideas on Europe.

It was a time of reforms when almost 200 years ago Wilhelm von Humboldt was put in charge for education and culture in Prussia. He became not only founder of the university but also a symbol of a new approach on education. In his "Theory of Human Education" Humboldt spoke about "the impact of actions in our own lives" and "the links established between ourselves as individuals and the world around us".

Communication is an essential link between individuals and the world. And communication is a tool for democracy. In democratic societies citizens need to know what the decision makers actually do and they must have the means to scrutinize them. The right to vote is clearly a cornerstone to democracy, but the right to know should be just as important.

I chose three main questions which I would like to answer tonight:

- 1. What are the challenges we face today?**
- 2. Will the European Union be able to tackle these challenges and how?**
- 3. And how do we communicate (this) efficiently?**

There is a Chinese curse saying: "May you live in interesting times!" Definitely, times are interesting - and challenging.

1. Let me focus on four key challenges Europe has to deal with:

First, climate change. UN-Secretary General Ban Ki-moon described it as the "defining challenge of our age". I can only agree and would add that it is a challenge that will not simply disappear. On the contrary, the reality of climate change is already with us. In the United Kingdom, 2006 was the warmest year since records began in 1659. On the global level, the ten hottest years have all been occurred since 1990. There were three times as many extreme weather conditions and severe natural disasters during the 1990ies compared to the 1960ies.

But it is not only nature suffering from the daily impact of climate change. The consequences also affect mankind: damaged harvests and lack of water lead to starvation, damaged economies lead to waves of refugees and political instability.

There can be hardly any issue demanding results more urgently than addressing climate change.

But there is hope, and I will come back to that in the context of the next question.

Second challenge, the current financial crisis and the spill-over to the real economy. Over the past decades we have seen some crisis, in Latin America the debt crisis in the 80ies, the Asian financial crisis in 1997/98, in Argentina huge economic problems 2001. But what piled up now, triggered by the subprime mortgage crisis with roots some years ago, is unprecedented. Beginning with failures in large financial institutions in the US, it rapidly evolved into a global crisis resulting in a number of European bank failures, declines in various stock

indexes and large reductions in the market value of equities. We have seen already a spill over to the other sectors of the economy. Loss of confidence and lack of trust in the credit sector and elsewhere have led to a situation of anxiety. A global recession and growing unemployment seem to be unavoidable. This is too much for individual states to deal with, given the interdependence of markets in a globalised world. There is no "terminator" who could stop alone the crisis and bring economy back on track. Only cooperation and coordination of measures will lead to the best possible effects.

Third challenge, globalisation and transatlantic relations. The current financial crisis is only the latest event showing us the need for concerted action, involving key actors on both sides of the Atlantic. Neither Europe nor America can take on today's challenges single-handed. Money has no boundaries, whilst our thinking might have. Due to the inter-linkage of our economies investments in one part of the world might trigger effects in another. And with stock trading the effects might arrive in some minutes. Especially in the financial markets the US had dominated the rule making and the view how to regulate the market (or to be more bluntly how not to regulate it). Also other policy areas leave a huge margin for improvement to the US administration, just to mention climate change. With the newly elected President I hope for a new start for the transatlantic relations. I hope for stronger commitment to issues like multilateralism, democracy and the Millennium Development Goals. As Barack Obama said in his speech here in Berlin four months ago: "Partnership and cooperation among nations is not a choice; it is the one way, the only way, to protect our common security and advance our common humanity. [...] There is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one." Kennedy had spoken some decades before of "a declaration of interdependence".

Fourth challenge, democracy. There are important question to answer: How can we better anchor the decision making on European level with the desires of the people? How can we increase accountability? And how can we progress on transparency and openness? These will be key issues to better link people and politics (decision makers). And key elements to strengthen democratic control. To give one example: Negotiations on the climate package should not be done behind closed doors, but in a transparent way, in a way that allows the public to follow what is going on.

Jeffrey Sachs speaks about the paradox of a unified global economy and a divided global society where the poverty trap is self-reinforcing, not self-corrective. It is an alarming trajectory which constructs a "sustainability gap" that must be addressed. It is clear that we will not be able to mitigate climate change unless we address poverty.

2. But will the EU be able to tackle these challenges and how?

As a colleague has put it: "If you are not trying to find a solution, you are part of the problem". I can assure you: the European Union is trying to find solutions. That is what the European Union is all about - a cooperative venture that transcends geographic, linguistic and cultural boundaries. Respecting subsidiarity the European Union has shown in various policy fields its relevance and added value where Member States alone would not be able to tackle the challenges. It has delivered impressive results and is an inspiring model for other continents.

However, for me the decisive point is not to rest and praise the achievements but to look forward. Europe can make things better. Even in the current time of economic and financial crisis, I am convinced that we can create growth and more jobs, but also offer – at the same time - a clean environment and good social services. That's the "smart growth" the world needs, and Europe must lead by example.

The crisis and the tackling of the effects to the real economy should be seen as an opportunity to get things right and a chance to boost innovation. Watering down or postponing the decisions taken on the climate change package will be the wrong signal. Climate change will not wait until the financial crisis and the spill-over effects are over. Climate change is happening now and therefore we have to continue with our efforts to make our planet an attractive place for future generations.

Fighting climate change is not a problem or burden per se, but it is part of the solution. Stimulating the economy with green innovations will give Europe a competitive advantage compared to other regions of the world and will help to regain economic stimulus. "Especially in times of economic trouble we have to focus on future growth fields of environment and climate technologies". This is a quote of the Siemens CEO.

How can this be done? To give one brief example: by moving rapidly to a low-carbon economy. In 2007 the European Union agreed to cut the carbon dioxide emissions by at least 20% by the year 2020 and to invest heavily in renewable energies so that they provide 20% of our energy needs by the year 2020.

Our aim is to make the European Union far more energy-efficient and far less dependent on imported fossil fuels. We also need to invest more in bio-fuels and to produce our own share. It is not a clever and sustainable approach to depend on imported ethanol from Brazil, as turning maize or sugar cane into fuel takes food from the mouths of hungry people.

Smart growth also means investing a lot more in scientific research to develop new technologies. If Europe can be a world leader in "green" innovation it will make us more competitive and create many new jobs.

For example, renewable energy technologies already account for over €20 billion, and have created 300.000 jobs in the EU. We estimate that meeting a 20% renewables target will create up to a million jobs. Mindful that others will fill the space if we don't, the question we should ask is can we afford not to do it?

Tomorrow, the Commission will adopt a European Economic recovery plan for growth and jobs. The expectations throughout the Member States are high, to get a substantial share of the newly baked European cake for recovery. I believe this is the time to get things on the right track. Not putting money in some black holes of the economy, but to design a strategy for growth and sustainable development, for jobs and climate protection.

3. Let me now come to the crucial issue of tonight: how do we communicate (this) efficiently?

All of you will agree that even the best policy is useless if it is not known, if it is not properly communicated. How citizens' support can be achieved if they simply do not know what is they are supporting?

"No one will fall in love with Europe" – this quote of Jacques Delors is still a fact today. Europe is maybe not sexy, but it is important and it makes sense. Europe has been for a long time a project driven by some key political actors and a rather small political elite. Certainly, during the first decades of shaping the European architecture and the construction of the European "house" there was a deeply emotional appeal. But nowadays citizens are somehow used to the European idea and take it for granted.

Therefore, communicating Europe is certainly a difficult task, given the complexity of the Union made of 27 Member States, its evolving nature and because perceptions of the European project vary and are coloured to a large extent by national history and circumstances. And not to forget there are 23 different languages. I guess this challenge would drive most of the PR experts into despair.

The Lisbon treaty debate has shown that the issue is not just one of redressing ignorance and indifference. It is about serving the needs of healthy democratic debate, and ensuring that people have the facts they need and require – and are entitled to – to make their personal judgement. Communication is the response to the right of the citizens to be informed. And not least it contributes to the fact that the European institutions must be accountable, transparent, open and responsive if they are to remain legitimate in the public eye.

It is my conviction that communication is not a one-way-street, it has to be two-way. Not monologue, but dialogue. Listening as well as speaking. And I believe that the dialogue has to go beyond the usual clients, political leaders and traditional stakeholders. The dialogue should involve civil society, social partners, national parliaments and political parties, and not to forget individual citizens. It should reflect the social reality of the whole European Union.

It is essential to have this dialogue between the citizens and the policy makers in Europe. This should happen in a way as broad as possible: people should discuss what they would like the EU to do and what not, what the future of Europe could look like, what they expect and wish. It should be a lively, critical and contradictory debate. The EU was not created for the sake of bureaucrats in Brussels but to achieve concrete and tangible benefits for the citizens in areas where the individual Member State can not deliver adequately. Therefore the EU agenda must reflect what people want. That is the governing principle of democracy.

Against that background we have developed a completely new approach to European communication. An approach which puts citizens at the heart of European policies. Let me briefly explain my approach's guiding principles:

- **Explain better our policies:** speak in plain simple language, spell out the tangible benefits of our policies for the everyday life;
- **Listen better:** by better consulting opinion-formers and stakeholders - particularly civil society and Parliamentarians - and by carefully exploiting opinion polls: Put ears on the EU!
- **Going local and connecting with citizens:** We need to address each audience through its own tradition and culture and via the channels they are interested in. This is certainly the most difficult task and the biggest challenge of the communication strategy.

Do we have an information deficit? I do not think so. There is plenty of information on the EU and how it works. Some say even too much. Feedback from users tells us that finding out what is relevant information is often more difficult than getting the information itself. And you sent out information around the globe in a millisecond, but it might take years to get into the heads of the targeted audience.

What is necessary however, are improvements in transmitting our messages. Let me point to five areas:

First, we have to get rid of Brussels jargon. We have to talk to people in understandable terms, explain what we do and why and at the same time become much more professional in listing the Union's achievements. That is why I initiated the so called citizens' summary. This has to be added to new proposals, to explain in plain language the content and impact of our initiatives.

Second, we have to be clearer where to find useful information and help. In the jungle of various help desks and services of the EU, dedicated to citizens and businesses alike, it is more like navigating through Skylla and Charybdis, while it should be like rowing on the Havel. That is why we will establish a one-stop-shop, where everyone can turn to and receives answers and help.

Third, Europe must use the right tools and the right channels in communicating with citizens. Printed brochures are shining brightly, but they do not reflect the new modes of communication. TV, radio, Internet - that is what people use. And with these new channels there is also the opportunity to have it not one-way but two-ways: interactive with direct feedback. In addition, Europe has to be better defended. "*EU bans bag-pipes*" or "*EU wants to implement speed limits on German roads*". Certainly, we can not be aware of each and every false story. And unfortunately we can not correct these messages all over Europe. But we have to take up a stronger stance and fight back. Rebuttal! Fighting the fog and the myths about Europe! We have put on a specific website some of the stories spiced up by newspapers and turn it right. Here I would expect also the national, regional or even local politicians to be more active. It is also for them with the authority on their respective level to rebut false accusations.

Fourth, creating a European political culture. We have to ensure that public debate finds its way into the European decision and policy-making process, that citizens get their entitled right to be heard. Communication does not happen in an isolated vacuum, but in the public sphere. It is the public sphere of 27 Member States and of 23 languages. And to make it even more complicated: it is the public sphere of 3660 TV channels in Europe, of 25.000 journalists and of 480 million citizens.

Communication about European policies needs to go beyond national boundaries, with cross-border communication channels promoting debate and dialogue on issues of common concern. That has been stimulated by some Commission initiatives of the last years.

Plan D has been a success and the new Debate Europe builds on these experiences. The audiovisual strategy fits in that perspective as well. I am convinced that to empower citizens by giving them access to information will put them in a position to hold an informed debate on EU affairs.

Fifth, "communicating Europe" must be done in partnership. The Commission alone can not possibly bridge the gap between the European Union and its citizens. The Commission needs to cooperate and coordinate. It needs to work in partnership with the other institutions, the Member States, national and regional parliaments, civil society and, of course, the media.

For far too long, Member States and Institutions have each communicated on European issues individually – not to say sometimes contradictory. And for far too long Member States did take part in the blame game, where they sign up to decisions and sell it as their own achievement if positively perceived at home, but use the Commission as a scapegoat if negatively perceived. That is why we have pleaded for quite some time to have a common understanding between the actors of "communicating Europe". Just one month ago the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission have signed a political agreement to address in the future the communication challenge together.

Member States and Institutions have already started to put the agreement in practice, by agreeing, for the first time, on joint communication priorities for 2009. These are: the 2009 European Parliament elections; energy and climate change and the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain.

As the British say: "The proof of the pudding lays in the eating" – and the European elections 2009 will certainly be a first test case whether we can achieve a higher turnout and stimulate more interest for European politics and policies.

US election campaign

Before I conclude let me have a brief look over the Atlantic. The US election campaign has shown for the first time the powerful role of the internet in an election campaign. As an American analyst has put it: Roosevelt was elected for his use of radio, JFK for his use of TV and now Obama for his use of the web. The internet has transformed how candidates campaigning, raise funds and speak to voters. While it has not ended the traditional media, it has for sure changed the balance.

During the election campaign we have seen quite interesting ways of getting messages across: political and satirical videos, online advertising, the 24/7 news and SMS-infos. But the most striking development for me was the emergence of web communities and the extent to which applications such as YouTube, Facebook and MySpace helped shape the election campaign and perhaps ultimately the result. Barack Obama's use of the latter was probably decisive first in obtaining the Democratic Party nomination and then again for his victory.

The Internet has made the whole electoral process more of a decentralised open discussion thanks to the community mentality on the web and redefined the relations between candidate and activist. It was also a key tool to attract particularly young voters.

What are the lessons to be learned for us? Despite all the differences between US and Europe, the role the internet will play will change the setting also in Europe. The use of modern communication tools, decentralisation of campaigns (including the shift of control on the agenda to the activists) and the creation of channels and forums to listen to and discuss with voters will certainly be key elements soon to come in Europe.

End

Communicating with citizens is important for deepening democracy, legitimacy and accountability. The Commission has set out a clear vision for a European Communication Policy. A policy that serves the citizens. The strategies we have adopted are continuous policies. Some of them already produced results and proved success in some aspects. Progress will take time, and efforts will not stop with the end of this mandate, as the next step should be to further empower and involve European citizens in EU affairs.

Coming back to the title of my speech: I think that there is a successful way to communicate Europe. It is not a "mission impossible", but a challenge and a task not to be solved via a simple Brussels directive. For me it is "mission irresistible" – and a never-ending task.
