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EUROPEAN ELECTIONS AND EU PRESIDENCY - MAKING EUROPE PART OF THE SWEDISH PUBLIC DEBATE

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- ES GILT DAS GESPROCHENE WORT -

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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has been almost twenty years since the Wall came down just a few blocks from this building. Twenty years since a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe began the long and difficult road towards democracy and integration with the rest of the continent. And in just a few days from now, we will celebrate that it has been five years since we united East and West in the same European Union.

This university can be seen as a symbol for this European reunification. A symbol of the fact that Wilhelm von Humboldt's ideas on enlightenment, educational freedom and human liberties were those that defeated totalitarian rule in Europe. For decades, this university was subject to this destructive hardship and oppression. But with its proud history - and as a home to European unifier Robert Schuman a century ago – it's no surprise that its legacy of enlightenment survived and that it has regained its place as a scene for creative and forward-looking discussions on European integration. Ladies and Gentlemen, let me tell you how proud I am to be able to address you here at the Humboldt University today.

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There's no doubt that the European cooperation has advanced in the past twenty years. It has gone from an economic community of six Member States to a union of 27, with a single currency, open borders and cooperation within most political fields. And it has developed from an inter-governmental organisation to a Union with an elected parliament, representing nearly half a billion citizens. This has indeed been a fantastic development.

But with more decisions taken jointly in Europe, and by moving towards a more federal structure and parliamentarism, we are facing a serious challenge. Many citizens still see the EU as a bureaucracy far away, which is difficult to understand and which does not concern them at all. To make it short: Whereas much of the political agenda has gone European, the public debate remains purely domestic. So, how can we contribute to moving Europe into the public debate?

I have been asked to speak on the subject on how Europe could eventually make its way into the public debate in Sweden, and how the upcoming European elections and our EU presidency can contribute to this. I will use this opportunity to widen the scope from Sweden to the rest of Europe. Because I know that most Member States share the same problem, although the reasons may differ: Europe hardly plays any role at all in the domestic political debate.

In my opinion, the low turnout in the European elections is a concrete evidence of a lacking political debate. In the 2004 elections, only 46 per cent of Europeans used their right to vote. Whereas Germany found itself just below the European average, Sweden had a record low among the "old" Member States with 38 per cent. An example from the United Kingdom speaks for itself. There were more citizens televoting in the "Big Brother" TV show than those showing up to elect their favourite MEP's. Last week, the European Commission released poll figures predicting a turnout in the European elections that is even lower than five years ago, in most Member States.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the fact that so many Europeans choose not to state their opinion about policies in the European Union is a serious problem for democracy. The cases of Sweden and Germany are particularly interesting, as both our countries are stable democracies with a tradition of high turnout in our respective general elections, with approximately eight out of ten citizens voting. I don't want to speculate about the particular case of Germany, but let me say a few words on the situation in my own country. I believe the main reason behind the vast difference in voter turnout is the lack of a political debate on Europe, which for a long time resulted in a negative view on the Union as such, as well as a lack of confidence in the European institutions.

To put this in a context, I'd like to take you back almost 15 years to November 1994. This is when a referendum was held in Sweden on the issue of joining the European Community, and Swedes voted yes with a narrow margin. The referendum followed on months of intensive campaigning, which divided several political parties, trade unions and even families into two even camps. The issue of European Union accession was sensitive, and this deep split became particularly serious for the governing Social Democrats, who have since then basically been incapable of discussing Europe. Even today that very party has put a euro-sceptic as top of its list to the European parliament election.

Nine years later, in 2003, the polarisation between yes and no was again fuelled by a referendum on the euro. This time, the result was negative.

I dare to say that this division between yes and no paralysed the Swedish debate on Europe for more than a decade. Rather than discussing on how to use the European Union to solve common problems, the debate narrowed down to arguing whether the EU membership is a good thing or not. It doesn't come as a surprise that this resulted in a majority of Swedes for a long time remained sceptical to the entire European project. I am happy to tell you that this situation has changed.

According to the latest Eurobarometer, published in December, 59 per cent of Swedes considered the EU membership to be "a good thing". This is up from 49 per cent in just two years, and from 32 % since 1996. For the European Union as a whole, this figure has declined in the last couple of years and has now stabilised around 53 per cent. Obviously, there are big differences between Member States in this respect.

I am sure that there is a number of reasons behind this shift in Swedish public opinion as regards the European Union. Polls show that most Swedes consider the EU membership as a "natural" thing. 15 years of membership has shown that it's simply not that dramatic any more. One reason could be that the current government has a truly positive attitude towards European cooperation.

A crucial part of the policy to bring Sweden to the heart of Europe is to stand up and defend the Union back home. Policies that annoy citizens cannot simply be 'blamed on Brussels'. Our Ministers and MEP's were part of making the decisions!

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In spite of the fact that a majority of Europeans actually supports the European Union, there is still a long way to go before Europe will become an integral part of the day-to-day political debate in most Member States.

So how do we get there? Is there any way that Europe itself can get citizens more involved?

One small but important step is the Lisbon Treaty, which I hope will come into force by the end of this year.

Being a supporter of a true Constitution for the European Union, I of course regret that the Lisbon Treaty will not be a simple and comprehensive booklet for everyone to read. **Still however, I dare to call the new Treaty the greatest democratic improvement in the Union's history – so far.** It will provide the EU with the necessary set of rules and a fresh institutional framework. This is necessary to make the Union more open and effective in order to address a number of challenges that we are already facing. But the Treaty also brings the Union closer to citizens in several respects: The Council will be opened up to the public and national parliaments will be given a greater say on EU policies. NGO's and local authorities are to be consulted before decisions are made. The right for citizens to launch policy initiatives is introduced. And last but not least, the European Parliament will be placed on equal footing with Member States in making laws that concern half a billion Europeans.

A new Treaty will not be the magic wand that makes citizens discuss Europe for breakfast, but it will be a tool to make the Union more open, transparent and democratic. And that itself will help to promote public debate and participation.

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Another discussion concerns the existence of a European public sphere. This space, and the possibility of a pan-European political debate is lacking in Europe today.

Like Dr. Jürgen Gerhards expressed it, there is a lack of public sphere – an *Öffentlichkeitsdefizit* - in the European Union. What he and many others claim is that a functioning democracy requires a common public sphere. And to improve democracy in the European Union, we would need such a sphere on the European level.

Much of this is true. However, we can never establish a public sphere by political decisions. What we can do is to contribute to creating platforms for dialogue and the development of civil society on the European level.

There are obstacles. For instance, the fact that we use 23 official languages in the EU is of course a barrier towards developing European media that would reach all citizens. Still however, there are numerous possibilities.

European umbrellas groups already play an important role in developing a European public sphere. As an MEP, I was regularly lobbied by NGO's such as Amnesty, the Red Cross, trade unions and small business associations. All of these are important actors in European policy-making, while at the same time they are deeply rooted in local communities across Europe. When national NGO's link up to Brussels through active participation in this kind of umbrellas, I believe it will lead to increased understanding of the EU and more people back home taking an interest in the European agenda.

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European political parties could also become key actors in a future public debate on the European level.

Several party federations have already gone towards individual membership and use modern technologies to facilitate debates among members all over Europe. Still, I doubt that the existing European parties will have much impact on the upcoming election campaigns this year. However, I strongly believe that they can play a role in stimulating a debate on European policies within and between national parties. Common electoral platforms and coordinated campaigns can definitely contribute to bridging the gap between national and European politics.

At least until the day that we can vote on European lists for the European Parliament, I am quite sure that each Member State will remain the main scene for political debate. But this doesn't mean that Europe must continue to be left out of the discussion. On the contrary, we need to work on all levels to **move the European agenda into the day-to-day political debate in Member States**, and to make it easier for the public to get involved.

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Ladies and Gentlemen, "European institutions have produced European beets, butter, cheese, wine, veal, and even pigs. But, they have not produced Europeans". This is a quote by Louise Weiss, who was a famous French intellectual and Member of the European Parliament.

It's possible that Louise Weiss was right. And it's of course impossible for a democratic society to force a certain identity upon its citizens. But is it really so that every citizen of the Union needs to have a European identity in order to take an interest in issues that are dealt with by Europe?

I don't think so. It's not my task as a politician to convince people to feel European. On the contrary, it's the inspiring mosaic of identities, languages, traditions and political cultures that is the foundation of this Union, and that has made it a success for the past 50 years.

Considering this, it goes without saying that the debate on Europe will – and should - differ a lot between Germany and Greece, or between Sweden and Slovakia. A political debate can never be promoted through colourful leaflet published in Brussels.

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I would like to mention two things that are important if we are to make Europe part of 27 different, national political debates.

The first one is that we need to make clear that what parliamentarians and government ministers decide in Brussels is linked to local politics in Munich, Milan and Manchester.

For two years, I have been touring Sweden to discuss Europe with local mayors and regional councillors. I always explain to them that, on average, six items out of ten on their council agenda are somehow affected by decisions taken in the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. This could range from legislation on food safety and rubbish collection to public procurement and projects financed through the cohesion policy. One recent piece of legislation that will have considerable effect on the local and regional level is the working time directive, affecting working hours for firemen, nurses and other public employees. A second one is the directive on patient mobility, which is currently negotiated in Parliament

and Council. Decisions that are taken after endless debates in Brussels not only affect citizens through implementation by Member State governments, but also through policies carried out by local councils and regions. This is particularly true in countries with a wide sphere of authority for the local or regional level. If this link is made clear to local and regional politicians, NGO's and local media, I am confident that we will lay ground for a political debate that can start bringing Europe to the kitchen tables.

The second thing is that politicians start discussing Europe at home and find solutions to the challenges that the EU is facing.

Ladies and gentlemen, as a political scientist, I would be able to dwell for hours on the need for a European constitution. But this is a passion mostly shared by other political scientists and constitutional lawyers. And the European Union has already spent too much time and effort on discussing constitutional matters. Europe needs to move from navel-gazing towards delivering results.

The Union's rapid response last autumn to the crisis in Georgia, and the way European leaders have recently acted to protect the financial system and stabilise the European economy shows that this is possible.

In the latest Eurobarometer, the following question was asked: "For each of the following areas, do you think that decisions should be made by the national government, or made jointly within the European Union?" A majority of Europeans believe that issues such as the fight against terrorism, environmental protection should be a responsibility of the EU. The same goes for energy policy, foreign affairs and immigration. These results correspond to those issues where Europe needs an ambitious agenda in the near future. But if tough decisions are to be taken, they need to be preceded by a thorough, democratic debate. That's why it's time that political parties make these issues part of domestic policy by bringing them right into their election campaigns. That would also be a sign that citizens' concerns are taken seriously. Also schools have a responsibility to teach students that the European Union is an integrated part of the domestic decision-making process. In light of the upcoming elections and the presidency, the Swedish government cooperates with the Commission in training high school teachers in this field.

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Ladies and Gentlemen, on 1 July, Sweden will take over the presidency of the European Union. For us, this is a unique opportunity to move processes forward in a number of the key areas. But it will also be a difficult period, surrounded by particular circumstances.

Sweden will lead a Union with a newly elected Parliament and a new Commission will be installed during the autumn. We also face the complex process of the Lisbon Treaty, with a possible new referendum in Ireland. It's obvious that this situation requires a lot of careful planning. But sometimes things turn out like the John Lennon song "*Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans*". Planning is important, but things seldom turn out the way you intended. That means that we also have to expect the unexpected and plan for the unplanned.

Let me highlight some major issues that will be on the top of the Swedish agenda in the second half of this year.

The first one is the economic crisis.

The world is experiencing the worst recession since the 1930's. Most countries in Europe are heavily affected by the crisis, with rising unemployment and Member States experiencing negative economic growth. I'm convinced that our economic development and future prosperity will depend on how we can shape better conditions to respond to opportunities and challenges in a world of new markets and new competitors. If the EU makes the right economic reforms now, it can secure a prosperous, fair and green future for Europe.

To make this possible, we need open markets for goods and services. But also open markets allowing money and people to move from declining into growing sectors. We need to devote resources to research, innovation, better education and training systems.

Protectionism cannot make Europe wealthier, it's only part of the problem. This is why we also need an open global trading system. We will gain nothing by trying to keep our doors shut, and we will all be losers if we try to isolate our economies from globalisation.

The Swedish presidency will lay the foundation for a renewed agenda on growth and jobs, with a focus to strengthen our competitiveness globally, while transforming Europe into an eco-efficient economy as well as coping with an ageing population.

The second issue is climate change.

The European climate deal of two years ago, when Member States agreed on reducing CO2 emissions by 20 per cent, and 30 per cent in case of an international agreement, was a historic achievement. At the December summit last year, we could also agree on a binding climate package, which is the first step towards a global climate agreement in Copenhagen in December. It's crucial that Union carries on its work to fight climate change, despite the economic crisis. The international negotiations on a post-Kyoto agreement will be the top priority for the Swedish presidency.

Our goal is to get most parts of the world onboard for a global deal. The European Union can show leadership, but it requires us all to do our homework and get our act together.

The third issue concerns justice and home affairs.

Mobility of people from countries outside the EU has by some been seen as a threat to our security. Common efforts have been focused primarily on the fight illegal immigration.

This is important, but time has come to also look at mobility as an opportunity. We must avoid building closed walls along the borders of Europe. When the current crisis is over, Europe will need more people in the work force. Most Member States already face a situation where fewer people in the work force will have to support a growing number of elderly.

Sweden will work to adopt a new five-year "Stockholm programme" in the area of justice and home affairs. The development of an effective and coordinated European migration policy will be one of the major issues addressed here, next to the establishment of a Common European Asylum System.

Cross-border crime requires cross-border cooperation. This will also be a priority for the presidency. Sweden will put extra emphasis on the fight of trafficking in human beings and illicit drugs, and we will work to provide police authorities with effective tools for exchange and cooperation.

One last issue I should like to address is the relations to our neighbourhood.

I would argue that the 5th enlargement of the Union has been one of the most important achievements in 50 years of European integration. The enlargement has confirmed the success of the our model of cooperation and contributed to the peaceful transformation of countries that were previously under totalitarian rule. This is why I am worried about the current enlargement *fatigue* that has arisen in several Member States. It's important that the economic crisis is not exploited as a way to stop further enlargement. On the contrary, we need to continue building stable relationship with our neighbours and plan for further enlargement. The new Eastern Partnership that will be launched in a couple of week may serve as an important step to bring those six countries in our Eastern neighbourhood close to Europe.

It's a key priority for Sweden that Europe keeps its door open to all European countries interested in membership, and with an aim to meet the all the necessary criteria. We need to honour our commitments to applicant and candidate states in the Balkans and elsewhere. And as a Swede, it's no secret that I would welcome an application from Iceland.

Turkey is another key country in this context. The current negotiation process paves the way for a development that is in the interest of the whole region. Turkey certainly needs to continue working hard to fulfil the criteria, but it is utterly important that Europe stands by its promises and continues membership negotiations. During its presidency, Sweden will push to open further negotiating chapters.

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Ladies and Gentlemen, there are divergent views on Europe's role in fighting unemployment and solving the economic crisis. There are many different opinions on energy policy and the best ways to reduce CO2 and tackle climate change. Asylum policy and migration is an issue which is subject to harsh debates both on national level and in Brussels. Cross-border crime is becoming an increasing problem all over Europe and needs cross-border solutions. The enlargement of the Union, and in particular the case of Turkey, is an issue of political sensitivity in many Member States. The challenges I have mentioned have a few things in common.

- They are all issues where the European Parliament has a significant say. If the Lisbon Treaty is eventually passed, the Parliament's influence will increase even more.
- None of them are uncontroversial.
- And all of them deserve to be part of a wide debate in each of our Member States.

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The question I have elaborated on today is how Europe can eventually make its way into the 'ordinary' public debate in Member States. It's not an easy task, and it will require serious efforts by politicians, civil society, schools, political parties and the media.

In Sweden, we will do our best to take advantage of the European Super-Year, where European elections are followed by a six-month presidency putting Europe on top of the agenda. We hope that many Swedes will feel involved but it is also our clear ambition to lead an efficient, transparent presidency that delvers for all European citizens.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in 1979, citizens in nine Member States voted in the first direct elections to the European Parliament. Now, on the 30th anniversary of the European elections, what could be a better way to celebrate than letting the European agenda into the everyday political debate?

Let's hope it can be done. Because democracy is too important to be left to just a few.

Thank you.
