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University of National and World Economy
“Where is Europe going ?”
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It is a great pleasure and honour for me to receive this honorary doctorate today. As a Professor of a Polish University, the honour which you are bestowing on me is particularly meaningful. I left full-time teaching and research at the Warsaw School of Economics to become a Minister in Poland some years ago. But it is always a pleasure to return to the academic environment which I know so well.

The contribution which Universities both in your country and in mine have made to the successful process of European integration has been immense and often underrated. University researchers have the skills, the interest and the time to evaluate alternative policies and to analyse their impacts on the economy and society in a way which is not possible for civil servants in the administration. It is for this reason that I invited a group of Professors on a weekly basis to meet with me when I was the Minister for European Affairs in Warsaw. These meetings gave me valuable insights into the legal and economic complexities of accession to the Union and the ideas presented by these academics often found their way into our negotiating positions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few weeks ago, in March, European leaders agreed a declaration to mark the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, the Treaty at the heart of the European Union. This indeed has been a time to celebrate. We are marking 50 years of European integration, 50 years of unprecedented peace, stability and prosperity on our continent, and at the same time looking forward to the next steps of our common European project. Our countries, Bulgaria and Poland, were not among those who were able to make the trip to Rome in 1957. But the founding fathers of the Union anticipated that one day we, and other countries, would come knocking on the door. They made clear that the Union would have to be prepared for this eventuality, but they could surely never have anticipated that the process would be accomplished so smoothly.

And the enlargement of the European Community – from the original 6 members in 1957 to 27 today – is surely a historic triumph, and one of which we too, Bulgarians and Poles can also now be proud. The European integration is the most successful example of peaceful political change that mankind has ever witnessed. Enlargement, the most powerful policy of the Union, has helped to transform countries across the continent into functioning democracies where the principles of liberty, the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law are firmly established. It has been a catalyst for modernisation, for the transition to market economies, promoting the prosperity and well-being of our citizens. And it has created the largest and most integrated community of democracies in the world.

The declaration which was adopted in Berlin is a short but rich document which celebrates these past achievements. But it is also a statement of our aspirations for the future and of our determination to fulfil them together. One sentence of the declaration stands out clearly for me and is of particular relevance for all of us here today who have a close involvement in the academic world. The sentence reads: "Europe's wealth lies in the knowledge and ability of its people; that is the key to growth, employment and social cohesion". I want to say three things about knowledge and ability.

First, while this statement is profoundly true - our greatest asset in Europe is without doubt our citizens – but knowledge and ability are not things that we can take for granted. And this is ever more the case in this time of globalisation. Globalisation is not just a slogan. It is a reality characterised by the combined impacts of economic and technological change on our economies, societies and cultures. The changes are taking place at a faster pace than ever before. They are an unavoidable part of the global world we live in, and we cannot, or I would even say we must not shield ourselves from them. I am among those who believe that globalisation is bringing us tremendous benefits. But I am acutely aware that the impact is very unevenly distributed across our economies and societies. While the benefits are most apparent in the upper parts of the labour market, the negative effects of the restructuring are mostly felt on lower paid jobs.

We therefore have to find the right ways to manage these changes, and to ensure that the benefits of being fully integrated into the global system are more evenly spread across our economies. And we must do so by implementing policies that provide our citizens with the skills and

opportunities to benefit from these changes. We must ensure, by investing in our education and training systems, that our citizens are equipped with the knowledge and the ability to confront with confidence the constant structural changes in our economies. Education is the key to social cohesion. It is the only way in which we can avoid a social fracture with one category of what has been termed "global" citizens who are the skilled workers of the knowledge economy, and a second category of "local" citizens who are excluded from the opportunities created by of the process of globalisation because they are not educated. And while we must invest in education at all levels, if we want our Europe to be at the frontier of technological innovation – producing and not just absorbing ideas – our universities and research centres will require particular attention.

My second point about knowledge and ability is that once we have them, we must ensure that we exploit them fully and wisely. Let me illustrate what I mean with one example – the issue of competitiveness which is at the heart of the European economic agenda. Competitiveness in the global economy depends on our capacity to generate new ideas – an area where universities and research institutes play a central role – and on our capacity to turn those ideas into new products and services – an area where the innovative capacity, the creativity and the drive of our entrepreneurs play a central role.

These are complex processes, but in short what we need is to create a Europe where the academic world can easily find ready outlets for its valuable research. We need to create a Europe where enterprises have the means and the initiative to benefit from the ideas and research of the academic world. To be competitive, our future Europe must empower

those people who have knowledge, skills and ideas by involving them fully in the design and implementation of our policies. This is a point which is particularly important to me as Commissioner for regional policy, because it is increasingly clear that it is at the local and regional levels that this empowerment can most efficiently be organised.

The third point I want to make is slightly more abstract, but it is one which I consider essential for the future of Europe. It is illustrated by a Eurobarometer opinion poll which was published at the end of last year. It is based on fieldwork carried out in September and October in the EU27, in the Turkish Cypriot community, and in two candidate countries, Turkey and Croatia. And this poll shows that, on a wide range of issues, it is those who have studied longest or who are still studying, who are consistently most positive about the European project, and most optimistic about what we can achieve in the future. Let me give you some examples. On the issue of support for Membership of the Union, the poll shows that 53% of the EU population considers that the European Union is a good thing. For those who are still studying the figure is 67%. In response to the question of whether or not the Union is going in the right direction, there is in general less optimism – only 33% of the population is positive. But again for those who are still studying the figure is significantly higher at 47%. If we turn to support for further enlargement of the Union, we see the same pattern. 46% of the general population is favourable, but for those who are studying the figure is 59%.

For me the key message from this and from other similar polls is the following. Knowledge is essential not only for giving our citizens the flexibility to prosper in a rapidly changing world. It is essential not only for

our competitiveness. Knowledge also plays a fundamental role in keeping our minds open – open to the possibilities of a shared future in the Union; open to new members; open to cooperations with all our competitors; and open and willing to play a leading role in promoting freedom and development in other parts of the world.

What does this mean in terms of policy? As I said before, quite simply that investing in education must be a priority across the Union. And while education remains an area over which Member States have responsibility, I want to conclude on an issue where the European Commission has played a central role: encouraging educational exchanges at the University level. The Erasmus programme is somewhat younger than the Union - this year it is celebrating its 20th Anniversary. But in that period of time it has been a tremendous success.

Record numbers of students and university teaching staff are now benefiting from Erasmus exchanges – over 154,000 students in the academic year 2005/ 2006, and over 23,000 teachers. The greatest increases have been in the Member States who joined in 2004, and this is a wave which Bulgaria and Romania are now joining. My closing message to you today is to seize these opportunities yourselves, and to use these exchanges to help you to stay at the cutting edge of your subjects, and to broaden your experience by enriching your knowledge of other languages and of other cultures. These exchanges have helped to build bridges and to open minds within the EU, and it is for this reason that the Commission has now also made them a core element of its relations with the candidate countries and potential candidate countries in the Western Balkans, and with the countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy. In this way we will create even greater access to

educational exchanges which, I am convinced, will further contribute to the promotion of democracy, stability and prosperity which has been the greatest achievement of European integration.